

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Domestic violence challenge and COVID-19 pandemic**Marzieh Nojomi, Ebrahim Babaei***Preventive Medicine and Public Health Research Center, Department of Community and Family Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran*

Dear Editor,

By the emergence of the COVID-19 transfers and relocation of people to prevent the spread of infection have been restricted. Long term staying at home during an epidemic increases the probability of interpersonal friction and conflict. During this time, the family members get close together and interactions between family members may be increased. Restricting people's movements during an epidemic can lead to psychological consequences such as stress, anxiety, and domestic violence consequently. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasis that with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety, and stress have increased worldwide notably.¹ These mental problems can affect all age groups and cause a variety of consequences including changes in sleep or eating patterns, difficulty sleeping, worsening of other chronic health problems, unusual increases in alcohol, drugs, and tobacco consumption.² Given these facts, supporting some groups should be a priority. These groups are women, older people, children, teens, and people with mental health conditions or even health care providers. Recent field researches show that women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence than the other family members during the quarantine period at home.³ Some studies show that this vulnerability is more common in rural women, low-educated, black race, and young age women.⁴

What should be done?

Violence against women is prevalent worldwide and increases under certain conditions, such as epidemics.⁵ Based on the evidence, about 90% of the violence was related to COVID-19 pandemic,⁶ for this reason, official organizations such as the United Nations (UN) warn about the consequences of this phenomenon.⁷ It is strongly recommended to cope with domestic violence, stress and anxiety in the family during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ If domestic violence ignored, as the psychological, physical and sexual, health of women and their children could be affected seriously. China's local police have reported that the COVID-19 epidemic has had a significant increasing effect on violence. As of February 2020, the number of reported cases of domestic violence in one of China's provinces has tripled compared to the same period in 2019.⁸ The WHO also confirms that although data is scarce, the domestic violence has increased in some countries, such as China, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ Experts believe that the extended quarantine period, economic or job losses, women's distance from paternal family and friends as emotional supporters, increased childcare due to school closures, limit access to sterilizing and protective materials against infection, limited access to vital sexual and reproductive health services, and limited access to protection services such as hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, legal aid can be examples of causative and accelerating to violence especially

against women during this epidemic.⁶ Domestic violence must be rooted out and controlled as soon as possible during outbreaks. Strengthening the mental and spiritual health of individuals and addressing violence is very crucial in these outbreak situations.¹⁰ Several ways can be suggested to overcome these psychological complexities. Breaking from watching, reading, or listening to stressful stories about outbreaks, deep breaths, regularly exercise and sleep, avoiding alcohol and drugs, enjoyable activities, connecting with friends and family through various communication methods, and talk to trusted people can be helpful. Religious leaders and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) also can play an important role in reducing the burden related to violence during the COVID-19. To better work, sufficient and accurate information about the COVID-19 outbreak and their consequences must be made available to these religious and supportive groups. It should be noted that during this period, the role of health systems and other official organizations to ensure women's access to support services is very important. Governments must persuade support organizations to identify and combat violence against women and make it easier for families to access these services. Healthcare facilities should provide adequate information about their supportive services, such as start-up hours, hotlines, and access to services methods.¹¹ The very important and ultimate goal is to stop the violence against women before it begins in any situation, especially during an epidemic. The effects of domestic violence in this situation, in addition to harming family members, make it harder to control and overcome the COVID-19, and even its effects last even after the pandemic. Consequently, to stop violence, as governments and supportive organizations have a key role to play, families should have further participation.

Some public resources that can address violence against women during the COVID-19:⁵

Making essential services available to prevent violence by governments and policymakers.

Providing treatments and essential information about the risks and health consequences of violence against women by health facilities.

Providing support services by humanitarian response organizations to prevent violence against women and their children during epidemics.

All community members should be being aware of the risk of violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic and be in touch to support women subjected to violence.

Conclusions

During the COVID-19 epidemic, any type of response of support organizations may significantly be weak and the police force was insufficient. Under these circumstances, reports of domestic violence to the police and related organizations increase, but sufficient support may not be received. Extremely recommend that further attention to the victims of the COVID-19 should not be

neglected. Community and support organizations should pay more attention to the social and mental consequences of the epidemic. Also, the effects of violence in post-COVID-19 should not be ignored. Individual and social rehabilitation of women, children, and other victims of violence and also strengthening the mental health of families should be a priority for governments and support organizations in post-COVID-19 times.

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