

Gender Based Violence during the lockdown

This brief article seeks to report on the state of Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Sri Lanka during the Covid-19 induced lockdown. It also attempts to engage in a cursory exploration of the social, economic and spatial factors which have affected the nature, scale and incidence of Gender Based Violence over the period.

1. What are we measuring - from what point on? Background, scope and the baseline

[In a WHO survey] More than half of all male and female respondents agreed that "a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family". A majority of men also related manhood to dominance and violence, with 58 percent believing that "it is mainly to defend the honour of your family even by violent means", and 57 percent agreeing that "to be a man you need to be tough". A significant majority of men (70%) also accepted masculinity as bringing with it household responsibilities that entailed providing for the family. (WHO,2018)

The landscape of gender relationships in Sri Lanka is typically explored through reports such as the above. While they paint a general picture of the prevalent attitudes towards gender roles, norms as well as gender performativity, it is important to note that there exists a pronounced lacuna in researching and reporting the extent and scale of GBV in the country.

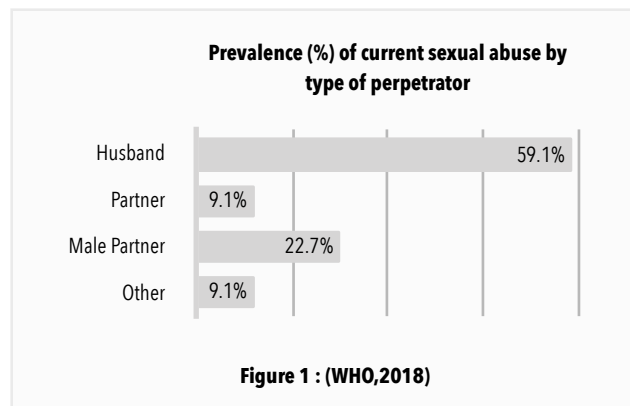
It is in such a context we explore how a rigid administrative response to an unprecedented situation such as Covid-19 has affected the already nebulous landscape of GBV in Sri Lanka.

For a meaningful distinction between lockdown specific modalities of GBV as opposed to general modalities of GBV, it seems intuitive that one must draw a retrospective baseline from before the lockdown had taken effect.

Unfortunately, one discovers that this is not entirely straightforward; The GBV profile of Sri Lanka has always been notably turbulent. Historic shock-response conditioning of behaviour, for example from the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, the war to post war era, and the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks as well as demographically specific modalities of GBV fractured along ethno-religious and urban-rural-state lines add complexity and nuance to the issue.

There never is a clear baseline, there is no flat land from which a hill or a decline is observed. There is rather, a singular point of comparison arbitrated by the start of the lockdown after which a spike in reported cases of physical GBV takes place. It should also be noted that from data made available thus far, the extent of structural, psychological and institutional forms of GBV after the lockdown is imprecise and underreported let alone before the lockdown.

The most effective way to articulate the state of GBV therefore would be to understand the key shifts of general behaviour, particularly spatial restrictions and restrictions to mobility and economic insecurities that a hard lockdown brings about, and then focus on how these shifts engender or compound readily existing forms of GBV.



2. Spatial dynamics of GBV during the lockdown - Public vs Private Spaces.

Figure 1 above, provides us with an indicator pertinent to understanding specific changes in behaviour brought about by the lockdown. Statistically, violence is most often carried out by a male inmate in private domicile, in fact - of all forms of gender based violence - domestic /intimate partner violence is the most reported as well as most widespread type of violence faced by Sri Lankan women (WHO,2018). Hence, following the lockdown, incidence of domestic and intimate partner violence has predictably risen.

For most women who consistently face domestic violence, the natural association between 'home' being a safe space as opposed to 'the outside' being an unsafe space is inverted. When the 'outside' becomes a hazardous or restricted space, the victim is trapped in an enclosed, private space with the perpetrator of violence. Compounding this is the fact that the closure of workplaces during the lockdown effectively doubles the amount of time the perpetrator shares with the victim.

The disproportionate deployment of policing resources to maintain the lockdown in public spaces would essentially mean that the police is under-resourced to contain the spike in domestic violence brought about as an effect of the lockdown. Same goes for lifeline institutions who find their meagre capacities saturated even during none-lockdown periods.

Malini Salpitikorale (Child Protection Force) shared, "to some of the complaints I have forwarded to the police, I am told that action will only be possible after the 20th (of April). Police efforts are fully on COVID-19, but we need to ensure we respond to violence as well (Daily Mirror, April 2020)

The alarmism and the cautionary language of the lockdown which emphatically associates 'home' with 'safety' overlooks the safety of those to whom public spaces are safe havens from private spaces of habitual violence.

3. Intimate partner violence (IPV) as a dissipative response to economic stressors and increase in demand for women's reproductive work.

Insofar as violence is at least partly a response to extrinsic stimuli, the pathology of IPV during lockdown must take into account the effects of economic stressors which are brought about by the lockdown.

It is theorised that in traditional domestic environments, inmates, (particularly women) are often forced to become channels through which their cohabitants dissipate stress. The dissipation of said stress, unfortunately at times manifest as instances of physical, verbal or psychological violence.

Needless to mention, these economic stressors manifest irrespective of gender, particularly when the lockdown can lower the household income considerably or suspend it entirely. The extent of these stressors is often more pronounced in low income households, for example in the case of daily wage earners whose immediate severing of income is not buffered by savings.

Women also find an increase in demand for their reproductive work. This may come in the form of tending to the needs of children as the schools remain closed while simultaneously catering to the needs of her partner; who now has greater presence, and by extension a number of additional demands in the household due to the lockdown.

There is a certain sense of private time and space that is afforded to an individual outside the household. 'Work', in a sense provides an escape from the routine stressors at home as much as 'home' provides an escape from the routine stressors at work. Alternating one's time between these two spaces aids passive dissipation of stress. A lockdown starves individuals from this passive dissipation as home becomes both a stress inducing and stress dissipating space.

The stress of having to meet the elevated demand for household reproductive work as well as the economic stressors from one or more inmates makes the house akin to a *pressure chamber*; wherein said pressure finds a channel to dissipate either through a series of non-physical micro-aggressions or an eruption of violence.

4. Alcohol and Gender Based Violence

Sri Lanka underwent perhaps one of the longest uninterrupted periods of alcohol prohibition in recent history. There is ample, albeit complicated opportunity here to study the widely purported causal relationship between GBV and alcohol. One must be cognisant of several variables here.

Firstly, there is the varying ratio between the consumption of illicit alcohol (Moonshine) and legal alcohol. When legal channels were all but closed, routine consumers of alcohol had two available routs. Either switching to moonshine or black market stock, both at significant price hikes, set against depleting incomes (often exacerbating household economic stressors).

It is also worth noting that moonshine was the routine choice for a considerable proportion of habitual consumers of alcohol in low income communities, even pre-lockdown.

An Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) report based on an all island survey in early May, 2020 found that alcohol consumption dropped by as much as 80% due to the closure of legal channels and routine raids by the police. The same report also states that domestic violence in households with routine consumers of alcohol has fallen.

These findings however, contradict the reported surge in hospital admissions and police complaints due to domestic violence (Daily Mirror, 2020).

It may be reasonable to hypothesise that stressors and spatial restrictions associated with the lockdown have offset or undermined the supposed easing of domestic violence brought about by the prohibition of alcohol. However, It is equally important to posit the hypothesis that the relationship between alcohol and domestic abuse is not as causal as it is purported to be.

The current situation reifies the view that GBV and its cultural normalisation largely emanates from cultural apologism for GBV, female subordination and associated modalities of behaviour rather than alcohol abuse even in households with alcohol abuse issues.

The lockdown could help demonstrate that it is perhaps unhelpful to *excuse* the perpetration of domestic violence as yet another negative externality of alcoholism, thereby portraying alcohol as the active cause, and the perpetrator a passive actor.

5. Structural violence and the economics of the lockdown

The apparel industry and the plantation sector constitute a significant portion of Sri Lanka's economic productivity. Although these industries have been hit differently by the lockdown, structural and economic forms of GBV persist in all scenarios.

About 85% of the apparel industry is serviced by women. The weeks following the lockdown witnessed a blatant disregard for the safety and wellbeing of these workers shown by both the state and their employers.

"[Following the government's instructions to keep the garment factories running during the lockdown] Some companies closed the gates and made the girls work until the 19th. In the end, they did not even provide any relief, transportation to the least, for them to return to their homes." (LankaNewsWeb, 2020)

The techniques of power utilised by both the state and industry to have large amounts of workers trapped in place without food, money, sanitation or security (LankaNewsWeb, 2020) while being forced to work in tightly packed spaces during a pandemic demonstrates the structural violence deployed by centres of masculine power in subjugating women workers.

The plantation sector, which also continued to operate during the lockdown tells a similar story: "The Ceylon Workers' Red Flag Union say coronavirus public health measures mean little on estates. There are no facilities to wash hands with soap during a shift and masks are not always issued, even though it has been mandatory to wear them in public since early April." This is often coupled with a lack of supplies for basic daily necessities. (The Guardian, 2020)

The lockdown highlights the degree to which economic and structural violence faced by women can intensify during times of crises, it also signifies the importance of acknowledging the intersectionality between labour rights and women's rights, particularly in the time of post Covid-19 economic austerity.

5. GBV as an externality of a militarised, masculine response to Covid-19

From advisory social distancing guidelines to mandatory lockdowns with varying degrees of restriction, the world has seen variegated responses to Covid-19. Sri Lanka's response, while its effectiveness being a matter for a different article - has been one of the more forceful and all encompassing.

There was little to no evidence of civil society stakeholder involvement in the state's response to Covid-19. By extension there was virtually no internal or external advocacy for developing contingencies to alleviate or mitigate the specific effects a lockdown would inevitably have on women.

It is likely that the lack of supplies, income and mobility would have rendered women more vulnerable to various forms of coercion, violence and exploitation.

Some activists raise the concern that women may be even less likely than usual to report instances of domestic violence during the lockdown period due to the fear that their partner might be taken away and detained or quarantined. (Daily Mirror,2020)

The lockdown specific language between the public and the state apparatus, often conditioned by terminology such as *curfew, surveillance and contact tracing* engenders a different set of emotions in post conflict communities compared to their largely benevolent perception(s) elsewhere in the island.

It must be noted that times like these may potentially return war-affected communities to a place of trauma, anxiety and stress often overlooked by centrally planned interventions. These conditions have the potential manifest as serious precursors to Gender Based Violence.

Hence, the gendered effects of a post-war lockdown which partly relies on the militarisation of surveillance and public services may have been differently received by the North and the North East where the incidence of IPV is often as twice as high as the average of 17% (WHO, 2018) and a large concentration of households are women led.

Unfortunately at the time of writing, there is no reliable data or any exhaustive methodology at all to accurately report on the specific anxieties and stressors that the lockdown may have engendered or reinforced in post conflict areas. Nonetheless, It is important to design post-Covid 19 research and development interventions with provisions and contingencies in place to address them,

5. Conclusion

The ongoing disruption to normal life brought about by Covid-19 has strained the capacity of authorities, activists and researchers to efficiently respond to issues such as GBV or any other concern(s) which are not deemed to fall within Covid-19 critical priorities.

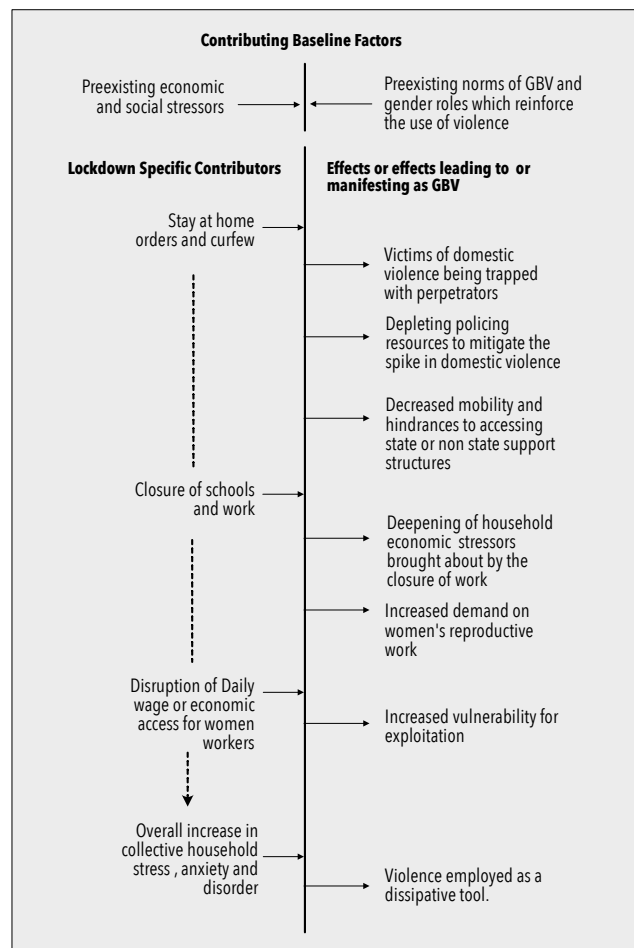
The extraordinary nature of circumstances not only adds to the plight of victims of GBV, but also hinders the acute gathering and reporting of data during the period.

This brief, albeit the scarcity of extensive studies - tells a cautionary tale of yet another shock-response scenario which will add to the already turbulent profile of GBV in the country.

While the brief's cursory observations are consistent with the worldwide trend of a spike in GBV, paucity of data hinders it from drawing any extensive comparisons, However, the brief notes the lack of any strong contingencies or planning deployed within the country in dealing with GBV during the lockdown.

The true extent of the lockdown's effects on GBV therefore can only be assessed effectively in retrospect when the immediate crises normalises. Nonetheless it must be stressed that the real, longterm challenges to mitigating GBV will be much more pressing during the inevitable recession that will follow the pandemic. Therefore, reimagining our post Covid-19 future must entail contingencies which mitigate the differential effects of a shrinking economy on women.

Figure 2 - Condensed summary of potential causal effects of GBV during the Lockdown



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