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**When it is not Safe to Stay Home: How the Coronavirus pandemic has led to a rise in domestic violence against women.**

Since its outbreak last year, COVID-19 infection has significantly changed aspects of our lives. On March 11, 2020, the novel coronavirus was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Since then, more than 20 million people worldwide have been diagnosed with the virus, more than 700,000 have died, and the virus has triggered enormous economic and social devastation. Although the spread of Coronavirus is nonselective in its effect, Coronavirus has worsened and provided more clarity on the marginalization of women and girls due to domestic violence. Also, the Coronavirus crisis has compounded the pre-existing issue of domestic violence against women primarily caused by gender inequality. Therefore, COVID-19 has affected women most uniquely due to the perpetuation of domestic violence(DV) against women. Domestic violence against women involves emotional abuse, physical and sexual abuse. DV against women is the most common form of violence against women— it's evident in most societies globally(Kaur and Garg) and often perpetrated by an intimate partner. Due to measures like lockdown and social distancing to mitigate the spread of Coronavirus, women find themselves in more vulnerable environments. These unsafe environments are homes, where

women and girls should typically feel and be safe. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres crystallizes the matter succinctly when he states, emphasizes, “for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes”(UN Chief Calls for Domestic Violence). Also, women are unable to get the help they need because of being locked in at homes with their abusers and inadequate services to help victims of violence. With 1 in 4 women at risk of becoming victims of severe intimate partner violence in their lifetimes(Statistics), before the pandemic, according to the US National Domestic Violence Hotline(NDVH), women are even more unsafe. This study intends to show how women in abusive relationships are facing two pandemics: COVID-19 and domestic violence, and explain why it is not safe for women in abusive relationships to stay home. Also, this study will suggest solutions that will address the issue to create safe homes for victims and survivors amid any crisis. Addressing domestic violence against women comprehensively will create safe homes for women not only during the current pandemic but also post coronavirus and in future crises.

Necessary policies of isolation and confinement to stop the spread of Coronavirus disease have increased domestic violence incidents. In a report by UN Women, Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka states, "more domestic violence helplines and shelters across the world are reporting rising calls for help" (Mlambo-Ngcuka). In the report, Phumzile points out that government authorities, women's rights activists, and civil society partners have indicated a rise in reports of domestic violence in Canada, Argentina, the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Germany(Mlambo-Ngcuka). Violence against women has escalated as victims and survivors are trapped in homes with abusers. According to Axios, the number of domestic violence cases reported to the local police tripled in February compared to the previous year in China(Allen-Ebrahimian).

Additionally, studies show that domestic violence, which mostly affects women, intensifies during crises that affect lives both socially and economically; COVID-19 is not an exception. In fact, a study by United Nations Development Programme(UNDP) in 2015 during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone(UNDP) and research by Oxfam International in the Dominican Republic during the 2017 Zika epidemic "suggest violence against women may shift in nature and scale as outbreaks affect social and economic life" (Roesch et al.). Similarly, this "shift in nature and scale" (Roesch et al.) has intensified brutality against women in lockdowns due to coronavirus. And, for instance, a report by UN Women confirms that helplines show an increase in calls for women seeking help related to domestic violence by more than 30 percent in Cyprus and Singapore and a 40 percent increase in Australia(Mlambo-Ngcuka). Therefore, domestic violence against women threatens the lives of many women, more than ever, due to the pandemic.

Another aspect of violence against women during the pandemic is it is difficult now, possibly more than ever, for victims and survivors to ask for and get help. With shelter in place measures and organizations that advocate for women's rights closures, victims of domestic violence are not able to seek help. It should be noted that it is ordinary for abusers to control victims by isolating them. It should be noted that it is ordinary for abusers to control victims by isolating them. The stay-at-home actions to mitigate COVID-19 fuel this form of control, making it more difficult for the abused to reach out to friends, neighbors, relatives and support services for help. All safe physical spaces for reporting and getting help—such as family justice center, NGO offices, and the like—are mostly operating online or via phone. Therefore, with the current global pandemic, according to CDC, social distancing measures can force abusers to be in the

same household with their abusers, thus spiking the risk of being abused(Preventing Intimate Partner Violence).

Economic-related stress and concern about the danger of the virus, coupled with unhealthy coping mechanisms, can trigger instances of domestic violence. With so many uncertainties stemming from the pandemic, anxiety, and fear mount. The measures in place to control the spread of the disease requires social distancing that may lead to isolation and loneliness. Isolation and loneliness may be overwhelming and hard to cope with, which may be stressful and increase anxiety. According to a review by Dr. Henry Vyner, a psychiatrist, cultural anthropologist and author, anxiety and stress make it challenging for people prone to aggression and anger to control themselves (Vyner). This failure to control aggression and anger may cause a quick escalation of conflict between intimate partners; thus fueling domestic violence. In addition, the pandemic has caused the loss of jobs, creating economic hardships that can lead to family conflicts. Moreover, “male unemployment may lead to more abuse not only by increasing stress but also by undermining men's feelings of control and economic security, creating an urge to exert greater control over their partners,” according to a study by Demography: U.S Library of Medicine (Schneider et al.). Also, unhealthy coping mechanisms, especially drinking too much alcohol, impair an individual’s judgment and increase the risk of hostility, according to the World Health Organization(WHO).

Women who are abused and children who live with or are aware of domestic violence face challenges and risks throughout their lives, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, substance abuse, and traumatic physical injuries, as well as cardiovascular problems, according to Dr. Mellissa Withers of the USC Institute on Inequalities in Global Health at the Keck School of Medicine. Moreover, According to Erica Weiler-Timmins, a

psychologist at the Milton Hershey School for low-income children, children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to suffer from, anxiety, depression, physical aggression, and sleep issues (O'Donnell et al.). Additionally, there is a high risk of abused children becoming abusers themselves as adults, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services/Office on Women's Health asserts, "children who witness violence between parents may also be at greater risk of being violent in their future relationships"(Women's Health). Dr. Withers also notes that adverse effects of intimate partner violence include direct costs stemming from emergency room visits, primary care visits, mental health counseling, and related services. These profound consequences of domestic violence are costly—they put the health and welfare of women, families, and communities in jeopardy. Given the current pandemic crisis that has put a strain on the current health and other services needed by victims and survivors, there is a necessity, more than ever, to comprehensively address domestic violence.

Women who are victims and survivors of domestic violence get physical injuries, which may sometimes result in death. In addition to bodily injury and death, the health of the digestive, nervous, reproductive, skeletal, and cardio systems of the survivor are greatly affected. Centers For Disease and Control(CDC) emphasizes that most of these health conditions are chronic (Preventing Intimate Partner Violence). CDC continues to explain, "Survivors can experience mental health problems such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)"(Preventing Intimate Partner Violence). These devastating health problems mean, victims and survivors will need medical and psychological help, and it is expensive to access such services. And according to the CDC, "the cost of IPV over a victim's lifetime was \$103,767 for women" (Preventing

Intimate Partner Violence). Also, COVID-19 has led to significant unemployment, which puts a financial burden on survivors, and in most cultures, women do not have financial freedom.

Despite the current global spike in domestic violence against women and girls due to the pandemic, the abuse is highly driven by already existing gender inequality—including gender roles, norms, unequal power between women and men as well as attributing women to lower status in most cultures. In an analysis in the Washington Post, Mala Htun: a professor of political science at the University of New Mexico and Francesca R. Jensenius: professor of political science at the University of Oslo, assert that men attack women beyond for reasons beyond what is happening at the moment of the abuse(Mala Htun). Htun and Jensenius explain that there are structural and contextual causes, including inequalities in wealth and power between men and women and social support for male dominance and men's right to punish women(Mala Htun). Moreover, a study conducted in Bangladesh concluded that intimate partner violence against women declines when there is equality in wealth and power between men and women, particularly in economic and social roles(Schuler et al.).

The pandemic has placed a spotlight on domestic violence and, in turn, to a root cause: due to a long time failure over generations to comprehensively address gender inequality. Because of inequality between men and women, most cultures, globally, have women treated as subordinate beings. Women's rights and values, as humans, are regulated by unjust laws and morally wrong norms deep-rooted in patriarchal beliefs and upheld by men. According to the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, patriarchy relies on “both on crude forms of oppression, like violence; and subtle ones, like laws; to perpetuate inequality”(Patriarchy & Power). Patriarchal beliefs ascribe subservient positions to women in society. Men are entrusted with power and hierarchical positions.

Because of patriarchal beliefs, both women and the entire society are made to believe that they do not deserve to be treated equally as men. Therefore, women are denied their natural autonomy and liberty to act and enjoy freedom as humans. Also, patriarchal beliefs are the core sources of the existing gender norms that devalue women, causing a lack of urgency and concern to end domestic violence against women. Such accepted standards of behavior in most global societies have led to an ignorance of the problem; consequently, the failure to address domestic violence. The Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence points out that patriarchy, as a structural force, influences power relations, whether they are abusive or not (Patriarchy & Power). Also, patriarchal beliefs that put women in subservient roles influence men to be abusers because they feel empowered by such beliefs to mistreat women. Jennifer Shore, MA, Executive Director, Focus For Health, an NGO that promotes advocacy, education, and research to combat the rise of chronic illness occurring around the world, emphasizes, "It has been consistently demonstrated that men who accept very patriarchal beliefs about gender roles have a higher likelihood of engaging in violence against women" (Shore et al.)

Denial and victim-blaming are among the tactics used by the patriarchy to support and uphold domestic violence. Such techniques involve silence, individualizing, personalizing, privatizing issues of abuse, blaming victims with statements like they "deserve it" or "must-have wanted it" or "must have done something wrong" or "man-haters", according to Harvard Law School Harassment Assault Law-Student Team, and hoping that the problem will go away or while you do nothing to address the oppression. Dr. Jason Whiting, a professor at Brigham Young University, confirms that issues of abuse such as sexual assault often remain hidden due to a combination of denial, victim, minimizations as they manipulate and confuse victims.

(Whiting). These actions of ignoring abuses have a culture of conformity where those abused feel disempowered to fight back.

Due to patriarchy, everyone in most cultures is brought up to be obedient to unethical laws that do not uphold the value of women, thus conditioning society to reduce the importance of women. In his letter from Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King Jr articulates that such unjust or morally wrong laws degrades human personality. In degrading human personality, King Jr points out that unjust or ethically wrong law gives oppressors, in this case, men, a false sense of superiority and the oppressed, in this case, women, a false sense of inferiority. The false sense of men's superiority and women's inferiority, enforced by the patriarchy, further normalizes the perpetuation of domestic violence against women, consequently, the anxiety of breaking or challenging what is considered normal, although it is inequitable.

It is fair to assess that the current global spike in domestic violence against women and girls due to the pandemic, the abuse is highly driven by already existing gender inequality—including gender roles, norms, unequal power between women and men as well as attributing women to lower status in most cultures. Coronavirus has made structural and systematic barriers to ending domestic violence against women visible. These barriers deep-rooted in the majority of cultures have made it hard to achieve gender equity; thus men continue to treat women cruelly. In an analysis in the Washington Post, Mala Htun: a professor of political science at the University of New Mexico and Francesca R. Jensenius: professor of political science at the University of Oslo, assert that men attack women beyond for reasons beyond what is happening at the moment of the abuse(Mala Htun). Htun and Jensenius explain that there are structural and contextual causes, including inequalities in wealth and power between men and women and social support for male dominance and men's right to punish women(Mala Htun). Moreover, a



study conducted in Bangladesh concluded that intimate partner violence against women declines when there is equality in wealth and power between men and women, particularly in economic and social roles (Schuler et al.). Also, many studies show that in communities where women are empowered through being valued, given decision-making power, and allowed to access opportunities and resources there is less domestic violence.

As discussed above, the current surge of domestic violence against women is primarily caused by gender inequality deep-rooted in patriarchal beliefs and norms that discriminate against women and girls. Despite the need for an emergency solution to the current surge in abuse, strong efforts to prevent violence from happening—in the first place, are central to solving the issue. The solutions may include outlawing domestic violence and improvements to existing laws, challenging beliefs and norms that devalue women, and deny women their autonomy as well as ending epistemic injustice by those meant to support victims and survivors.

Women should be paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave, childcare, unemployment insurance. Having family leave, medical leave, and paid sick leave puts victims and survivors in better financial situations to seek help. Support services such as counseling associated with supporting women who are domestically abused are expensive. Also, During the current pandemic, unemployment has impacted many families, which includes families of domestic abuse of victims and survivors. It should be noted, According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), “survivors’ safety can be directly linked to their economic stability, and abusers often use financial abuse as a tactic for maintaining power and control over a victim”(Still Unequal on Equal Pay Day). Also, victims and survivors without employment insurance are likely to suffer financial uncertainties due to job loss. Child care is expensive and domestic violence puts children in high psychological risks, including trauma and depression.

The already existing lack of affordable child care in the US, now further strained by COVID-19, means exposing children to unsafe homes with domestic violence. To avoid children from witnessing abuse, they need child care, which can be costly.

Moreover, victims of abuse may suffer from economic exploitation. Anita Bhatia, the Deputy Executive Director of UN-Women, called for governments to provide packages for paid sick leave and unpaid care work, to allow women facing domestic violence to maintain financial independence from their abusers(UN-Women). She also suggested that public health response should be gender-sensitive because the pandemic uniquely impacts women. Therefore, having paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave, childcare, and unemployment insurance empowers a victim to seek and leave an abusive relationship because they are more likely to have the economic means.

Outlawing domestic violence and improvements to existing laws will also create safe homes for women. Some countries, particularly in the developing world, do not have legislation on domestic violence. Outlawing domestic violence will create a defined path to justice for women abused. According to the United Nations, 37 countries globally still exempt perpetrators from prosecution if they are married to or eventually marry the victim. In comparison, 49 states have no laws protecting women from domestic violence. For example, Angola, Bahrain, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the Philippines exempt rapists from criminal penalties if they marry their victims. This exemption compounds on the gender inequality cause of domestic violence(Mala Htun and Francesca R. Jensenius et al.).

Furthermore, existing laws should be improved to comprehensively and explicitly address domestic violence against women. Existing laws, such as the Violence Against Women Act(VAWA) and Victims of Crime Act(VOCA) in the United States, have helped to protect

survivors by ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable as well as encouraging survivors to speak up when abused. VAWA and VOCA improvements over the years have created services to mitigate domestic violence such as hotlines and shelters, but further improvements are still needed. Osub Ahmed, a senior policy analyst for women's health and rights for the Women's Initiative and Robin Bleiweis, a research associate for women's economic security with the Women's Initiative, at the Center for American Progress call for improvements because VAWA is "just one component a much-needed broader continuum of care and safety that prioritizes the needs of survivors." Ahmed and Bleiweis note that VAWA and other laws should consider "the differing experiences of survivors across communities and building solutions that are culturally competent"(Ahmed). Laws should comprehensively address the root causes of domestic violence; minimize economic barriers and costs to justice for survivors; ensure there are health and safety support for survivors as well as build a network of trained professionals to assist survivors in their journey to recovery and stop illegal and toxic and illegal behaviors(Ahmed) of masculinity. Also, legislating equal pay to guarantee economic stability for survivors is crucial. It's critical to have a reliable support system that prevents abuse, first from happening, for the world to be safe for women and girls.

Another solution is paying "attention to beliefs and norms and above all to power asymmetries that render women vulnerable to abuse" (Mala Htun and Francesca R. Jensenius et al.), according to an article in *Dædalus* journal, a Publication Of The American Academy Of Arts & Sciences. In the article, Htun emphasizes that women need a firm structural foundation—including resources, employment, social support—to contest and to exit from, abuse and harassment. The article further articulates that studies show that women are better able to leave abusers and bargain for more equitable treatment in a marriage if they have access to

resources(Htun). Therefore, ending the subordination of women to men and the inability of women to work will reduce domestic violence. As concluded in the article, empowering women is key to ending violence(Htun). Also, challenging beliefs and norms will give women back their autonomy. Both empowerment and independence of women ensure women's access to and control over resources. Having access to and control over resources means that women have decision-making powers regarding household decisions, employment, income, household assets, and expenditure. Also, autonomy gives women full authority over their bodies and uses their voices to fight against domestic violence.

An additional measure as suggested by Dr. Rachel McKinnon, an associate professor of philosophy at the College of Charleston, calls for an acknowledgment and awareness that "allies" can misbehave and stop the voices of those abused. Mckinnon states that allies can be part of injustice and oppression, through gaslighting, a form of epistemic injustice. To explain gaslighting, Mckinnon says, "gaslighting is when a hearer tells a speaker that the speaker's claim isn't that serious, or they're overreacting, or they're being too sensitive, or they're not interpreting events properly" (Mckinnon). Mckinnon further explains, "the hearer of testimony raises doubts about the speaker's reliability at perceiving events accurately" (Mckinnon). According to Mckinnon, Directly, or indirectly, such kind of behavior involves expressing doubts that the oppression that the victim is testifying to really happened as the victim claims. Due to allies discrediting a victim, the speaker is further victimized or discouraged from speaking up. Also, gaslighting by allies can involve using background knowledge that they know about an abuser to discredit a victim. Statements like, "I don't think he can do that," "what did you do make him upset" and "I know him, and I have never seen him do that" causes speakers to suffer credibility deficit, as Mckinnon points out. This behavior of a listener to a testimony privileging their own

first-hand experience over the testimony of the person they're supposed to be supporting, according to Mckinnon, often leads to minimization, victim-blaming, and denial of hostility that women face. To end the problem of gaslighting, Mckinnon suggests that those willing to support victims to be active bystanders, not allies. The goal of Mckinnon's suggestion is to cultivate concrete actions in people without a specific identity as allies. Allies, due to the status associated with their role, tend to avoid criticism. Still, an active bystander can only claim to be supporting when they are actively and appropriately taking steps to speak up or step into a situation where a woman is being abused—not only witnesses prejudice. To avoid more harm to victims of domestic violence, Mckinnon believes that it is vital for those who support victims to be aware of how they can be part of the problem.

This article has explored how COVID-19 has led to high rates of domestic violence against women and how the issue can be addressed to prevent abuse of women in homes, both in the current and after the pandemic. The article has described in detail how the current surge in DV in homes is primarily due to the failure to promote and achieve gender equality. Research shows that, despite the prevalence of domestic violence against women, the patriarchal beliefs and norms, implicitly, or explicitly encourage silence about violence through normalization. The current coronavirus crisis reminds us of a forgotten pandemic, DV against women, that needs our attention and serious solutions for homes to be safe for women during any crisis. For significant change to happen, domestic violence should be addressed head-on during the COVID-19 and beyond. To end domestic violence against women, women should be empowered, laws that exist should be improved; and new ones to explicitly address the issue should be enacted as well as victims and survivors should be treated civilly—with compassion, empathy, and consideration. There should be a civil discourse that aims to create tension between justice and the patriarchy

that maintains gender inequality to harm women; as Martin Luther King Jr. suggests, “we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create tension in society that will help men rise from the depths of prejudice” (2). Lastly, women are humans and deserve to be treated with dignity and their voices deserve to be heard; violence has ripple effects— it affects families and communities.

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