



Domesticated Poly-Violence Against Women During the 2020 Covid-19 Lockdown in South Africa

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Abstract Globally, increased domestic violence against women during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns concerned researchers, policymakers, governments and the civil society. In South Africa, an increased risk for gender-based domestic violence against women during the lockdown period was reported by various sources including the national gender-based violence call centre (GBVCC), the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the civil society. Covid-19 lockdown encouraged spatial distance: a public health measure. This measure inadvertently created social distance and social disconnection. Public life, which is frequently a coping mechanism and an escape for some women and girls at risk of domestic violence, was curtailed by the lockdown rules that forbade movements. Informal sources of help for victims of abuse were limited due to closed economic activities, and community-based helping services for domestic violence were not permitted to open. Some victims of domestic violence struggled with public transportation to access informal help, visit the police, social workers and other sources of help. Some organisations offered online and telephone services. The increased risk of gender-based domestic violence during the lockdown is indicative of poly-violence that women are exposed to. The risk of the domesticated poly-violence during crisis periods could be averted by focussing on risk reduction for all forms of violations against women.

Keywords Alcohol · Covid-19 · Domestic violence · Gender-based violence · South Africa · Violence against women

Introduction

The South African society has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence against women in the world (Durbach, 1999; Gender Links & Medical Research Council, 2011; Jewkes et al., 2010; Mpani, 2015; Platje, 2007). Gender-based violence is complex and refers to a vast range of violations perpetrated against women in defence of patriarchal traditional values, gendered hierarchy and sex-role expectations that uphold society's control over feminine and gender-nonconforming persons (Grootboom, 2016; Kiguwa et al., 2015; Mazars et al., 2013; Mkhize et al., 2010; Mpani, 2015). Gender-based violence against women is endemic in South Africa (Borer, 2009; Durbach, 1999; Gqola, 2015; Platje, 2007). Studies by organisations such as the Medical Research Council and Gender Links report that 1 in 4 adult women in the general population have experienced gender-based violence (see, Mpani & Nsibande, 2015). South Africa reports a high femicide rate, which is five times the global average (Mathews et al., 2014). Police records (Brodie, 2020) show that nearly 3000 women were killed in South Africa in 2017/2018, an increase of 11% from the previous year. Sexual assault also increased by 8.2% from 6271 to 6786. A 2013 study conducted by Gender Links in four provinces reported that a large proportion of men (Gauteng 78%; Limpopo 48%; Western Cape 35%; and Kwa-Zulu Natal 41%) admitted to committing some form of violence against women in their lifetime (see, Mpani & Nsibande, 2015). In the domestic

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sphere, perceptions that a woman has transgressed gendered sex-role expectations may cause tensions and arguments that turn violent (Brear & Bessarab, 2012; Brümmer, 2012; Gibbs et al., 2020; Gqola, 2015; Struthers & Meyer, 2012). Service centre data, including police statistics are a gross underestimation of violations against women because many of these experiences are not reported (Brodie, 2020).

Studies have consistently shown that high levels of alcohol use is linked to increased levels of gender-based violence and femicide (GBV + F) against women (Mpani, 2015; Mpani & Nsiband, 2015; Palmer et al., 2009; Zinzow et al., 2010). Alcohol abuse refers to regular or occasional excessive consumption of alcohol causing harm to self and others (Mpani, 2015). Notwithstanding race and gender differences in patterns of alcohol use, South Africa is named as having the highest level of adult per capita alcohol consumption in Africa (Mpani, 2015; Statistics South Africa, 2016). Research suggests that removing excessive alcohol drinking could significantly reduce domestic violence and increase safety for women (Dworkin & Peacock, 2013; Mazars et al., 2013; Mpani, 2015; Mpani & Nsiband, 2015). Alcohol-aggression theories explain the effect of alcohol and intoxication on aggression through diminished behaviour inhibition (Gibbs et al., 2020; Lange, 2002). Intoxication may make the aggressor (perpetrator) to see the actions of the target (the victim) as ambiguous; intoxication exacerbates these perceptions on the side of the aggressor/perpetrator. In gender-based violence incidents, the behaviour of the victim may be perceived, by the perpetrator, as arbitrary and threatening. Alcohol impairs cognitive systems and in a state of intoxication the aggressor may not pay attention to alternative cues and act to resolve what appears to be an ambiguous situation to them, by resorting to violence. The aggressor may thus act in defence and against the perceived threat (from the victim).

The Context

The disproportionate impact of crisis on women has been documented across the globe. Epidemics such as the 2014 Ebola Virus Disease, for instance, placed women and girls at increased risk of violence as found in a rapid assessment of violence against women and girls conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (Abel & McQueen, 2020; Bond, 2020). A study on the effects of this same epidemic found multi-level reasons for the intersectionality of discrimination against women, echoing the increased victimisation of women in times of crisis such as outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics (Abel & McQueen, 2020; Bond, 2020). This and other studies have shown that closures of public spaces and quarantines expose women and girls to

more sexual violence, coercion, and exploitation as a manifestation of structural inequities and weaknesses in gendered socio-economic and health systems across the globe (Abel & McQueen, 2020; Bond, 2020). South Africa has a history of violence, including violence against women. Post-Apartheid, millions of women are raped each year and yet very few men are brought to books and admit the crime (Gqola, 2015). In September 2019, the President of the Republic of South Africa declared violence against women, including femicide, as a national crisis.

At the beginning of the global lockdowns, a violent spike was expected and predicted in some places. Abel and McQueen reported that gun and ammunition sales soared in the USA, while in Switzerland justice departments prepared for increases in domestic violence (2020). This paper examines the manifestation of gender-based domestic violence against women taking into consideration the limited availability of one of the factors associated with increased domestic violence: alcohol abuse. This paper focuses on the South African context and offers an enquiry into the perception that domestic violence (DV) incidents have increased during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown. Globally, business as usual ceased for many as the novel corona virus (Covid-19) forced the society into country-wide lockdowns across the globe, with the exception of a few (Abel & McQueen, 2020; Bond, 2020). During the hard lockdowns, alcohol sales and public drinking were suspended in South Africa (COGTA, 2020). This created a “natural experiment” to examine the hypothesis that, removal of excessive alcohol use would reduce men’s use of violence against women (Gibbs et al., 2020).

The Natural Experiment to the Hypothesis about Violence Against Women During Pandemics

Against the background that links alcohol to violence, the Covid-19 curfews and lockdowns provided a “natural experiment” to test a hypothesis that reduced excessive alcohol use would reduce reports of Gender-based Violence Against Women (GBVAW). The enquiry examines the probable impact of ‘reduced’ alcohol drinking on rates of reported domestic violence during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns. This paper is wholly based on desktop review of the limited information that was available, less than a year into the pandemic.

The examination offers an analysis for domestic violence patterns that were reported during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns and makes recommendations for gender-based violence against women interventions. This study followed the rapid assessment methodology. This is a research method that is commonly used where data is needed quickly and where local constraints rule out conventional

research approaches (Mpani, 2015). There are two sources of data for violence against women: surveys and police service records. In this case, the rapid desktop assessment of service records was used to gather context specific desktop data as survey studies were not yet available due to the state of emergency. Desktop service records assessments were an appropriate method given the physical movement restrictions that were in place in South Africa at the time; this method has been used in other studies of violence against women during the lockdown (Buttall & Ferreira, 2020). Presentations, papers, media reports, grey literature and other communication around gender-based violence during the lockdown were electronically accessed.

Gender-Based Domestic Violence During Covid-19 Lockdown

At the beginning of the year in 2020, public health measures were adopted to regulate the spread of the novel corona virus. Social distance public health measures that put in place restrictions to movement meant that women at risk of domestic violence were in their homes, some with an abusive partner (Buttall & Ferreira, 2020; Tisane, 2020; UNFPA, 2020). The UN warned that “*as people spend more time in close proximity in household isolation...women and children are at risk of experiencing higher levels of violence*” (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Indeed, Google shared that by the end of March 2020, just about a month into the lockdown, there was a 70% spike in online searches for the words “domestic violence shelters” (Tisane, 2020; UNFPA, 2020).¹ The number of women calling domestic violence support services was reported to have risen significantly in various countries where a national lockdown was implemented (Tisane, 2020; UNFPA, 2020). Parts of Asia, North and Latin America and Europe showed a significant rise in the number of women calling helplines and reporting abuse (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020; UNFPA, 2020). Increases in domestic violence were reported in places such as Australia, France, India, Wuhan, Spain, Brazil, Cyprus, and New Orleans (Buttall & Ferreira, 2020; Tisane, 2020). In Tunisia, calls to a helpline in the first days of confinement increased fivefold. In Italy, calls to helplines dropped sharply; however, SMS and emails to support services increased (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). This resultant “*horrifying global surge in domestic violence*” (Tisane, 2020) was not entirely unanticipated (Abel & McQueen, 2020).

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/reports-75-per-cent-spike-in-searches-for-help-with-domestic/12101690>.

South Africa, saw the surge of gender-based violence since the implementation of the national lockdown, with 87 000 gender-based violence complaints in the first month (Tisane, 2020). South African news reported that Police statistics for the first week of lockdown showed that more than 2300 complaints of gender-based violence were recorded. An interpretation of the South African Police Service’s data suggested a reduction in reported cases of domestic violence (Dartnall et al., 2020). However, an examination of routinely collected data from the gender-based violence command call centre (the GBV CCC) suggested an increase of gender-based violence toward women in the domestic sphere. The GBV Command Call Centre categorised calls related to child custody, visitation, maintenance, counselling, depression, marriage and relationships as non-GBV, yet some of these could have been related to domestic disputes that are fraught with violence. The service record statistics also grouped alcohol related domestic disputes with other substances; thus, making it impossible to discern the effects of alcohol on domestic abuse. Despite these data challenges the increased reporting of domestic violence was confirmed by people who work on violence against women on the ground. A critical question to ask is whether alcohol abuse was reduced by the lockdown and closure of official alcohol sales.

Alcohol Use and Reported Rates of Domestic Violence

With lack of reliable data on alcohol use during the lockdown, it is difficult to delink this unexpected hike in domestic violence from alcohol use. Alcohol consumption may have continued in a number of places that could not be policed at the beginning of the lockdown. The UN raised a concern that since unhealthy consumption of alcohol is already linked to an increased likelihood of intimate partner violence, the risk for alcohol misuse may have become ‘*more acute during the COVID-19 crisis*’ (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Alcohol consumption continued for those with private bars because drinking in private homes was not barred; therefore, it is not possible to assume a reduction in alcohol drinking for people who keep alcohol in their private homes. Alcohol consumption was also made possible by robberies of liquor stores and home-made brewing in some instances. It is also not possible to estimate a reduction in excessive and binge alcohol drinking for those who had access to bootleg and illicit purchases of alcohol. It is also possible that the risk for binge and excessive drinking at the beginning of the lockdown may have accompanied the psychological panic and increased with being home. The next question that arises is, *could*

women's risk for domestic violence have been avoided and how?.

Social Distancing Became Social Disconnection During the Lockdown

In less individualised social and cultural contexts, people are used to turning to each other when times get rough (Abel & McQueen, 2020). During the lockdown, spatial and social distancing measures created problems of access to informal sources of support for domestic disputes (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Women, in particular, may avoid formal sources of help due to shame, fear of reprisals, or lack of knowledge on how to access available help (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Help seeking for abused women was severely impacted during the lockdown period as community-based services for abused women were closed and some shifted their services to online and telephone assistance (Buttell & Ferreira, 2020; UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). It is possible that this period increased awareness of the availability of the national command centre and redirected help-seeking behaviours of abused women away from community services and to the toll-free hot-lines; thus the national toll-free lines were confronted, for the first time, by the extent of the scale of the problem of domestic violence that they had never dealt with before (Buttell & Ferreira, 2020). To complicate this, the close proximity and increased visibility of police and security officers in communities may have falsely increased confidence that reports of domestic violence would be taken seriously and help posted immediately. Thus, up to 40% of women who normally would not seek help (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020), may have reported violence with the hope that with the presence of the lockdown patrol police, help will be dispatched sooner. The other question to address relates to the credibility and specificity of the service record data. The question is whether this data is indicative of increased reporting, increased risk of new incidents of violence or severity for those already exposed.

Reported Rates of Domestic Violence During the 2020 Covid-19 Lockdown, What do They Mean

Violence against women is a continuum of behaviours that women experience in their lives; these violations are spread across institutions. During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, schools, churches, workplaces, recreational activities and other public spaces were closed. Women were home and not exposed to taking public transport to participate in economic activities. Based on the profiles of

perpetrators of violence (Mpani, 2015) brothers, friends, neighbours, schoolmates, uncles, fathers, grandfathers and others were in close proximity: at home. Women and girls as their children, nieces, grandchildren, partners and wives bore the brunt as they were confined with their abusers (Dartnall et al., 2020). It is thus possible that the reported violence was an indication of poly-violence that is meted out by men in various spaces; this violence was now shifted to the domestic space. We use the term 'poly-violence' in this paper to highlight the multiplicity of violence that is meted against women.

Multiple sexual partnering is common among cisgender heterosexual men in South Africa and the lockdown period may have locked these men in with one partner (Soul City, 2008). If this was a main partner in a society where the function of women's bodies is regarded as to sexually service men (Gqola, 2015), his expectation for conjugal rights and sexual entitlement may have exacerbated domestic tensions, disagreements, and violence arising from refusal to have sex. Some men, as providers in their homes, expect sexual favours as a duty of their partner to demonstrate her reciprocity towards their material contribution to the home (Brear & Bessarab, 2012). Women are already at risk of relationship and domestic violence and their experiences during the lockdown may indicate increased prevalence and severity, rather than new incidents of violence. The reporting may be prompted by the frequent occurrence and the severity of the violence thus increasing the calls to service centres.

During the lockdown, women who were in processes of separation or divorce may have had their plans halted and remained stuck with their abusers. This is so, as some lawyers and courts reduced their capacity and others closed (UN Joint Global Programme, 2020). Community-based organisations that assist women with legal aid also closed and women at risk of violence from their partners were unable to escape the toxic situations.

At the start of the lockdown, all schools and the post-secondary school and training systems closed. With children at home, it is possible that this created a space for experimental and binge drinking for some young people. Under-age drinking is already a problem in South Africa (Sabi & Rieker, 2017) and is associated with domestic and other kinds of male participation in violence (Mpani, 2015). It is possible that during the lockdown; youth violence may have resulted in domestic disputes and these were reported to the service centres.

The four examples in the preceding paragraphs demonstrate how men's propensity for violence may have been domesticated during the lockdown as perpetrators of violence shifted their target to the women in their domestic sphere. The domestication of gender-based violence should awaken the conscience of the society to realise the poly-

violence that women and girls are generally exposed to; to which the risk remains regardless of where women are (Nduna, 2020). The lockdown demonstrated once more what feminist scholars of gender-based violence emphasise: that patriarchy is the root cause of violence against women, including domestic abuse (Brear & Bessarab, 2012; Gqola, 2015; Motsei, 2017). Gender-based violence against women is a tool that is used to chastise, discipline, sanction, teach a lesson; to create a dutiful woman (Motsei, 2017). Thus, all probable situations as discussed here may have increased incidence, prevalence, and severity of violence against women.

Domesticated Poly-Violence

Poly violence refers to the idea that women are at risk of multiple forms of violence at different places. Women are not safe from gender-based violence at schools (Centre for Applied Legal Studies & Cornell Law School's Avon Global Center for Women and Justice and International Human Rights Clinic, 2014; Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2014), in churches (Whitson, 1997), in colleges and universities (Bennett, 2009; Kiguwa et al., 2015), and even in the workplace (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). Women experience microaggressions and are side-lined (Bosch, 2020). Violence against women in public spaces is normalised and in these public institutions, girls and women experience violence from sober men. The perpetrators of various forms of gender-based violence spent time at home during the Covid-19 lockdown (*arguably sober*); their domestic partners were at risk of violence exposure and hence an increase in reports of domestic violence when the society least expected it. This increase was alarming despite the fact that service data are known to be an under representation of the extent of actual women's experiences of violence as many women victims do not seek help (Dartnall et al., 2020).

Putting Feminist Foresight in Hindsight

The safety of women around the world, whether inside or outside their homes remained the overarching issue during the Covid-19 perilous times (Dartnall et al., 2020; Tisane, 2020). To curb the threat of domestic violence, governments in various parts of the world took corrective measures, as 90% of cases were thought to be triggered by the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic (Tisane, 2020). Measures ranged from apps which allow individuals to seek help without making a call, use of "code-words" to alert help-services and authorities of a case of domestic violence, which will then amount to the relevant authorities

offering help (Tisane, 2020). Where possible, domestic violence perpetrators were evicted from the house, and court fees related to protection orders were waived (Tisane, 2020). Tisane warned that "some women have a greater chance of surviving COVID-19 than they do of surviving domestic violence" (Tisane, 2020). Yet, in many countries, South Africa included feminist foresight was ignored. Feminist foresight here refers to the early warnings that were issued by organisations such as the UN Women who understand women's risk for violence.

Conclusions

Given the context of violence against women during the Covid-19 lockdown, South Africa's violent past in the context of Apartheid (Gobodo-Madikizela et al., 2014) does not wholly explain the surge of domestic violence against women between March and July 2020. This paper provides insights in terms of alcohol aggression and yet is limited in its ability to produce depth because of lack of reliable and good data from the services used. Routinely collected service data is not reliable as some potential domestic violence cases (in particular those related to child custody, maintenance, marital problems, etc.) were logged as 'non-violent/non-gbv' by the command centre (Nduna & Tshona, 2020). Using readily available desktop data, which was not collected using tailored data collection tools, and is not aggregated and detailed, it is difficult to ascertain whether it is the gender-based domestic violence against women or if it is the reporting of such instances that has increased during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Either way, this study is crucial as it highlights the poly-violence that women are exposed to and how this risk is domesticated in times of curfews. This study further presents a hypothesis to be tested; which is that it is possible that men who are at risk of harmful drinking practices are the same men who are at risk of perpetrating violence (Gibbs et al., 2020), and that one does not cause the other, but an external factor causes both. The main external factor is patriarchal gender norms which socialise men into use of violence in relationships. Notably, this hypothesis is drawn from gender-based violence outside of pandemic situations and the pandemic might add to the external factors.

Recommendations

Based on the observations from the 'natural experiment' as presented here; programmatic recommendations are possible. There needs to be continued and sustained investment in interventions with men to reduce use of violence through behaviour-change interventions: promote gender

equitable values, encourage alternative conflict resolutions and better communication skills. Whilst this recommendation is not specific to lockdown, reduction of men's use of violence generally will have positive impacts for the society to deal with future crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.

There is a need to strengthen support systems for women who plan to escape from an abusive situation; these include women in the process of separation and divorce. This support needs to be strengthened during curfew periods. Women should be provided with safe shelter, over and above what is normally available, or the perpetrators should be ordered by the court find alternative homes.

In the context of Covid-19, gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) was noted as a 'shadow, twin, silent, parallel' epidemic and yet researchers have long suggested that the government needs to mobilise massive resources and implement stringent measures to ensure the preservation of life, as GBV is responsible for pre-mature deaths in women. The government is capable, and in a position to galvanise and implement efforts, with precise measures to address gender-based and domestic violence, which has been rightfully declared a national crisis with lives lost daily. As the prognosis of the Covid-19 pandemic is unknown, national consultations with women-led organisations in preparing disaster management interventions to reduce violence against women are needed. At the time of publishing this special issue, the South African government had set up a Solidarity Fund to address GBVF through local community-based organisations.²

This paper identifies a few gaps in knowledge about gender-based violence against women during times of lockdowns. Groundbreaking research to understand the risks, dynamics and solutions to this problem is needed. Whilst some of this research can be conducted online, researches need to be mindful of the digital divide bias in such studies (Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre & University of Pretoria's Centre for Human Rights, 2021). Access to the internet and to cellphone network is not universal in South Africa. This means that research will have to blend online with face to face methods.

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Declarations

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² See <https://solidarityfund.co.za/>.

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