
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**Domestic violence amid the COVID-19 lockdown: a threat to individual safety**Olayinka Stephen Ilesanmi¹, Modupe Ariyo², Aanuoluwapo Adeyimika Afolabi¹¹ University of Ibadan, Nigeria² University College Hospital, Nigeria

Abstract

The lockdown measure in Nigeria has been effective in reducing COVID-19 transmission, with the closure of schools, restricted movements, and recommended homestays. In spite of these benefits, the COVID-19 lockdown has resulted in varying levels of distress among individuals. This letter-to-the-editor aimed to describe the prevalence of domestic violence amid the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as strategies for reducing its effects. The social, economic, and financial distress experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown period between March and July, 2020 has increased the prevalence of domestic violence. The financial difficulty associated with the lockdown has been known to precipitate stress and frustration, and subsequent negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and depression; all of which are baseline triggers for domestic violence. Domestic violence could result in impaired mental health states and internet addiction among vulnerable population groups especially women and adolescents. To abate these and other untold consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown, we recommend that support systems, such as counselling and psychotherapy sessions, should be instituted for victims of violence, while legislation are implemented for justice to be served to the perpetrators of violence. Also, social safety nets such as food and cash supply should be provided to low-income members of the population to overcome the economic burden which may culminate in violence amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dear Editor,

The Coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) was publicly announced a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 30th January 2020, and a pandemic on the 11th of March, 2020 [1]. Since its onset in December 2019, more than 50,414,235 people have been infected across the globe and more than 1,255,831 people have died, of which about 0.1% of deaths occurred in Nigeria as of 10th November, 2020 [2]. To mitigate further transmission of COVID-19, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, declared a nationwide lockdown, with the closure of schools, places of worship, markets, government and private establishments, land, sea, and air borders, necessitating everyone to stay at home by limiting human contact, and allowing time to implement effective control measures [3].

The lockdown measure, although effective in reducing disease spread, has led to unintended negative consequences such as social isolation, loneliness, inability of employers to pay their workers, job losses, increasing financial difficulties, a worsening of existing mental health conditions or the precipitation of new ones (e.g. depression and alcohol abuse), and the occurrence of violence in the home setting [4]. Impaired mental health states and increased viewing of pornographic materials online

have led to increased violence against children and spouses who are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence [5,6].

COVID-19 lockdown and domestic violence

Domestic violence is a phenomenon which refers to all forms of violence perpetrated in the domestic sphere by one family member against another, which is perpetrated in the form of stalking, physical, sexual, and emotional violence; and child abuse which includes sexual, physical, emotional abuse, and neglect [6]. Domestic violence has been known to worsen in situations of social, economic, and financial distress such as that experienced during the COVID-19 induced lockdown [7]. The earnings of Nigerians, most of whom work in the informal sector, plummeted due to the enforcement of the strict lockdown measure. These, coupled with the government's inefficient distribution of palliatives to the worst hit masses, contributed to the decline in the socio-economic status of families [8].

Managing the fear and uncertainty associated with COVID-19, disruption of family routine, spending increased time with a violent partner and isolation from others are identified factors that precipitate and worsen the occurrence of violence, as the lockdown meant families sheltered together, and stayed in the close confines of the home for prolonged periods at a time [8]. As people become trapped in their homes, the home increasingly becomes the site of physical,

emotional and sexual violence, sometimes due to exposure of the perpetrator to elevated levels of stress birthed by the untoward consequences of the pandemic. The perpetration of violence could continue unabated and may worsen, with little or no penalty for the aggressor due to the existing restriction on visits during the lockdown [6].

The financial difficulty associated with the lockdown has been known to precipitate stress and frustration, and subsequent negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse; all of which are baseline triggers for violence [7]. Financial distress was found to have led to an upsurge in the occurrence of spousal abuse in major cities in Nigeria such as Lagos, which was the epicenter of the pandemic; and Abuja, the federal capital [8]. Impaired mental health states and increased viewing of pornographic materials online have also been implicated in the etiology of increased violence towards children and spouses who are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence [5,6]. An increase in the incidence of domestic violence during the lockdown was reported in many countries such as the United States, China, and many European countries [9,10]. India recorded a 131% increase in domestic violence in areas that had strict lockdown measures [11]. The print media in Nigeria and globally reported an increase in sexual violence [6].

Where do we go from here?

With regards to COVID-19 and future pandemics, it becomes imperative to ensure that as lockdown measures are lifted with gradual resumption of normal activities - children returning to school and adults gradually going back to work; everyone (including victims of domestic violence themselves) should learn to be their brothers' keeper; and recognize that some of the behavior being manifested may be a sequelae of domestic violence. Also, awareness campaigns need to be communicated on social and traditional media that lockdown periods do not justify violence regardless of the cause, and should not be promoted [12,13]. Also, support systems and counselling and psychotherapy sessions should be instituted for victims of violence, while legislation are implemented for justice to be served on the perpetrators of violence. In addition, social safety nets such as food and cash supply should be provided to low-income members of the population to overcome the economic burden which may culminate in violence amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethics and consent

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