



# **Taming the Tide of Intimate Partner Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Theories and Approaches**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The increase in reported cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) during the COVID-19 pandemic remains an issue of concern. Research has shown that the rise in IPV has been a recurring trend during previous pandemics such as SARS, Zika, and Ebola. Broadly, several economic and psychological stressors have been identified as major contributors to the crisis. This paper builds on these recognized stressors by discussing them using two theoretical frameworks namely, the general strain theory and the feminist theory. Using existing literature on general strain theory and the feminist theory, the study qualitatively described how events such as mass unemployment, economic volatility, and the mandated lockdown due to the pandemic have exacerbated the conditions that promote IPV. Though the theories alone cannot solve the complex dynamics of IPV during COVID-19, it can help to inform the strategies used to mitigate it. This paper exposed the need for further research on the theoretical and empirical explanations of the causes of IPV before, during, and after pandemics and natural disasters.

**Keywords:** Intimate Partner Violence, COVID-19, Pandemics, General Strain Theory, Feminist Theory

## **INTRODUCTION**

Before the onset of COVID-19, curbing the occurrence of intimate partner violence (IPV) has been a growing discussion among most government parastatals and social service agencies across the globe. This is due to the physical, physiological, and economic consequences it has on individuals, families, and society. The World Health Organization (WHO) identified that intimate partner violence and sexual violence also lead to short and long term physical, mental, sexual and reproductive problems (WHO, 2010). IPV is designated as a public health concern requiring immediate attention. For the purpose of this study, IPV is described as when a spouse or ex-spouse, dating partner or ex-dating partner intentionally uses or threatens physical, emotional, or sexual harm. In IPV, harmful actions comprise of, but not limited to; hitting, choking, slapping, punching, verbal degradation, yelling, rape, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual contact (Daigle & Muftic, 2020). Both men and women in heterosexual or same-sex relationships can be perpetrators and victims of IPV. However, research shows that globally women represent a disproportionately high amount of IPV victims (WHO, 2010; Hardesty, 2020; Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Ali, O'cathain & Croot, 2019), while men are more often the perpetrators. Around the world, 243 million women and girls between the ages of 15-49 experience some form of IPV in a 12 months period (UNWomen, 2020).

It has recently been noted that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified reported incidents of IPV (WHO, 2020; UNHR, 2020; Kelly, 2020). Understanding that the occurrence of IPV increases when couples cohabit and experience stressful events (Daigle & Muftic, 2020), the global upsurge in IPV incidents did not come as a surprise to some scholars and researchers (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). The essential lockdown implemented in most parts of the world, to help reduce the spread of the virus might have unintentionally contributed to the increase in IPV. This has in some cases permanently placed victims of IPV in close contact with the offender. Tension among couples might also have risen as a result of physical and social isolation, disruption of daily routine, job loss and economic uncertainty (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020).

In a statement put forward by the United Nations, governments have been called upon to intensify the fight against IPV during the pandemic because doing otherwise could also lead to an increase in intimate partner femicides (UNHR, 2020). As governments and policy experts discuss IPV prevention during a pandemic, they navigate an uncharted territory which would need a great amount of research (Peterman et al, 2020). Therefore, this paper seeks to understand how the pandemic has contributed to the increase in IPV and how governments and social agencies in various countries have responded to the issue amid a pandemic. We also discuss resources that should be made available to victims of IPV during a pandemic.

### **Intimate Partner Violence in a Pandemic: Theoretical Framework**

Pandemics are not new to mankind, neither is the crisis of IPV. The occurrence of pandemics, defined as an infectious disease that has spread across multiple continents or worldwide, have been well documented throughout history. Some examples include the mid-century AD Justinian Plague, 1334 Black Death known for the death of one-third of the world population, 1918 Spanish Flu and more recently HIV/AIDS, SARS and Ebola (Huremovic, 2019). Likewise, IPV has been happening for a long time but has not always received the same attention as other health crisis.

Historically it was not always considered an offense for a husband to use violence to emphasize his dominance over his wife (Daigle & Muftic, 2020). However, compared to meticulous records on disease-related pandemics which are gathered over centuries, the collection of data on victimization and perpetuation of IPV is still a recent endeavor. This paper is not in any way an attempt to draw likeness between COVID-19 and IPV, rather it seeks to examine how pandemics can act as a risk factor for IPV. We do this using anecdotal information gathered through organizational reports and media coverage (Roesch et al, 2020; Patterman et al, 2020), considering that data on the effect of COVID-19 on IPV is scarce.

The link between pandemics and an increase in IPV has been described as “numerous and complex” (Hardesty, 2020). Ali, O’cathain & Croot, (2013) and Wolfe & Jaffe (1999), agree that finding theories that adequately explain this link has been a century long undertaking which has provided limited results. Although there is no “one size fits all” answer to this situation, as there is no central agreement on the causation of IPV, we however present an overview of two theories that might provide possible explanations to the growing rates of IPV during COVID-19. General strain theory from an economic perspective and the feminist theory from a psychological perspective attempts to explain the link between pandemics and an upsurge in IPV.

#### ***Economic Perspective***

When a person becomes economically vulnerable as a result of job loss, failed investments or unemployment, such situations can build up tension and frustration. Unfortunately, studies show that these circumstances increase the risk of a person engaging in IPV due to the lack of developed coping skills (Kohli et al, 2015; Peterman et al, 2020). The General Strain theory developed by Robert Agnew (2001) explains that there are “strainful” events that occur that make a person more susceptible to crime and delinquent behavior. He places the strain into two categories; objective strain and subjective strain. Objective strain is the actual stress event that takes place while subjective strain is how the individual evaluates that event either positively or negatively. Loss of employment is placed as an objective strain. Though evidence is limited, Agnew (2001) states that persistent unemployment is most likely to make a person act delinquently or commit a crime. The high rate in loss of income and financial instability during the lockdown can place additional stress on already vulnerable relationships which would increase IPV (Roesch et al, 2020).

#### ***Psychological Perspective***

Several studies have tried to explain the psychological causes of IPV offenders (Ali & Naylor, 2013). A key psychological component of IPV perpetuation is the action of the offender in trying to gain power and control over the victim. This is carried out through a variety of means such as isolation, physical harm, financial dependency, rape and manipulation. With the “stay at home” order in effect due to the pandemic, IPV victims are often placed at the “mercy” of the offender. For many victims of IPV, their homes were never the safest place for them even before the pandemic.

The concept of power and control in IPV lacks a central definition, which makes it difficult for empirical research (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Jenkins, 2000). Researchers agree that each person in an intimate relationship (regardless of gender) has a certain amount of power over their partner (Daigle & Muftic, 2020; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006). Though power can be unbalanced and abused, which often leads to IPV. Daigle & Muftic (2020) defines power as a person's ability to impose his or her will on another. Power is also described as influencing others behavior unilaterally by controlling their outcomes or resources (French and Raven, 1959 in Jenkins, 2000).

One of the popular theories used to explain power in IPV has been the feminist theory. The feminist theory is centered on the dominance of men utilizing violence to gain control. This use of violence is further enabled through "patriarchy, constructions of masculinity and femininity, and structural constraints in wife abuse" (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006, p. 13). Therefore, in a pandemic that presents numerous uncertainties, the male partner maybe more prone to think he is losing control of his environment thereby resulting to violence. Pandemics by itself carry negative psychological consequences which include but not limited to, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and other mental health disorders, both during and after the event (Pettermann, 2020). When this situation is combined with being in a volatile relationship there is the tendency for women to experience extreme violence in the hands of their male partners. The perpetrator is also prone to take advantage of the restrictions caused by the pandemic to intensify control of their partner.

### **Approaches to IPV in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Though theories may try to explain why IPV occurs, there is still a need for practical steps that mitigate IPV pre, during, and post pandemics. The growing rate of IPV during the pandemic has led to discussions on best practices for IPV prevention especially in crisis and disaster situations. This is an ongoing discussion in both developed and developing countries. France has had a 30% increase in cases of domestic violence (which IPV is included) since the lockdown (Euronews, 2020). In the Hubei province in China, cases have tripled during the lockdown from 47 last year to 162 this year (Guardian, 2020). Brazil, Spain, United States have also reported an increase in IPV reports during the pandemic. Chuku et al (2020), also observed an increase in Google searches for domestic violence help during the lockdown in Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda.

The few studies undertaken on the link between COVID-19 and violence against women, strives to draw parallels and lessons learnt during previous health crisis like HIV/AIDS, Zika, and Ebola. During these health crises a rise in IPV was recorded (Roesch et al, 2020). Increase in IPV has appeared to be present whenever there is a large scale health or natural disaster.

For countries to respond appropriately to violence against women, UN recommends the need for increased funding of resources like support shelters, hotlines and online counselling, women and girls affected by the pandemic, victims of gender based violence, and frontline health and social workers need to be prioritized, law enforcement officers and count systems must prioritize cases involving violence against women to demonstrate that impunity would not be tolerated (UN Women, 2020).

There is also a need to incorporate help and support services that victims can readily access without altering the offender. For example, France and Spain have developed code systems for reporting domestic violence. In France, pharmacies have been included as part of the health facilities where a victim of IPV can go to seek help (Euronews, 2020). Another effective tool is to increase awareness campaigns for IPV through adverts on television, radio, and other web-based media outlets, sensitizing the community on the dangers of IPV and available resources. These campaigns should target both victims and offenders.

Taking these steps on IPV prevention would be steps in the right direction. It is also important for countries to tailor prevention activities that ensure that the needs of IPV victims are not sidetracked during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **CONCLUSION**

Discussing IPV can be complex, considering that combating the pandemic has been burdensome and has put a stain on government and healthcare resources and personnel. However, it is a conversation that is

necessary due to the negative consequences IPV has on the victims and society. IPV is a global issue that has been described as a “pandemic within a pandemic.” Analyzing the reason for an increase in IPV cases globally due to COVID-19, has broadly been discussed from an economic and psychological perspective. Therefore, it is useful to continue to examine some theories that have been used to explain IPV before the pandemic and how they might still explain the increase in cases during and after the pandemic. Also, governments, policymakers, and stakeholders in IPV prevention must continue to seek innovative and productive ways to assist IPV victims in the face of global crisis. As more empirical data become available on IPV during the pandemic, there is the need to re-examine how well these theories truly explain the increase in IPV during these unusual times.

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