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November 2021

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### Recommended Citation

Ali, Rabia and Khalid, Asma (2021). COVID-19 and Domestic Violence in Pakistan: An Analysis of the Media Perspective. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(12), 98-114.  
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss12/6>

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## COVID-19 and Domestic Violence in Pakistan: An Analysis of the Media Perspective

By Rabia Ali<sup>1</sup> and Asma Khalid<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

There has been an alarming increase in domestic violence (DV) cases in different parts of the world amidst COVID-19 related lockdowns in 2020-2021. This paper aims to understand the prevalence of DV in Pakistan through the analysis of online media sources published during the lockdown period. The objectives of this research include the questions (1) how was the issue of DV presented in the Pakistani media during the lockdown period? and (2) what messages were conveyed by the media discourses? A summative qualitative content analysis was used as a method for data collection and analysis. Three national newspapers were selected as data sources due to their relevance in reporting women's issues and their reputations. A purposive sampling technique was used to select a total of 20 articles published in these newspapers, which focused on DV amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The data shows that DV is seen as a serious social issue and is condemned in these newspapers. The power and control of perpetrators over women has increased during the lockdown and the home has converted into a dangerous space where women feel insecure and unsafe. DV is directly related to financial constraints, inadequate support groups, and poor social services including security and housing. The government attempts to address DV during the lockdown are considered inadequate and symbolic. Along with the attention of the state, the contribution of civil society is needed to redress the issue of DV in Pakistan. Engagement of community volunteers, neighbors, educators, and health workers may help to gain the trust of the women victims who are unable to access state-run initiatives such as helplines.

*Keywords:* Abuse, COVID-19, Home, Lockdown, Pakistan, Qualitative Content Analysis, Violence, Women.

### Introduction

A newly identified Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, has caused a worldwide pandemic of respiratory illness, called COVID-19 (Sauer, 2020). While research on the medical consequences of the virus on human beings is still underway, social scientists are interested in understanding how the pandemic has impacted the social lives and behavior of individuals in societies (Piquero et al., 2020). The challenge of COVID-19 has brought many new and complex challenges to the

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social lives of people across societies. The government implemented lockdowns have crippled the livelihoods of billions of people living in slums, informal settlements, inadequate housing, and those working in the informal economy (ILO/UNICEF, 2020), reducing the global working hours by 4.5% during the first quarter of 2020 (Peprah & Koomson, 2017).

Besides the economic constraints, the concept of “stay home, stay safe” was emphasized by governments forcing families to spend a considerable amount of time together (Sajid et al., 2020). As a result of the lockdown, women employed both within the formal and informal economies were forced to stay home, contributing to dependency, exploitation, and violence (Muldoon et al., 2021). Even in cases of extreme violence, women were forced to live with their abusers especially in lockdowns imposed by different governments (Taub, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Hence, this silent pandemic—also known as “shadow pandemic”—has brought a hidden pandemic in the form of domestic violence (DV) (UN Women, 2020). Some call this “intimate terrorism”; an extreme form of violence is exercised by one partner to terrorize the other (Taub, 2020). It puts women at risk of facing serious physical injuries and mental trauma. The increase in violence has raised pressure on the government to respond, to allocate more budget on establishing hotlines, apps, and shelters to protect women and children. In this situation, many governments have been criticized due to their inefficiency and delayed responses.

Statistics show that early cases of DV were reported from Australia (Duncan, 2020), China (Usher et al., 2020), Europe (Davies & Batha 2020; Reuters News Agency 2020; Kelly & Morgan 2020), and the United States (Bullinger, Carr & Packham 2021; Kofman & Garfin 2020; Piquero et al., 2020). In the US, an increase from 20% to 30% in DV was observed soon after the lockdowns (Kofman & Garfin 2020; Piquero et al., 2020). Similarly, there has been a 20% increase in domestic and sexual abuse in Spain, a 30% increase (in DV) in Cyprus, and a 25% increase (in DV) in the United Kingdom (Bradbury & Isham, 2020). While these countries have well-established systems for monitoring or reporting DV, which partly contributes to the rates observed, in developing countries such systems are nonexistent or inefficient (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2020). Consequently, the increase in domestic violence cases has not been adequately addressed. In the context of India, long-term analysis has found an increase in domestic violence cases one year after the first round of lockdowns (Ravindran & Shah, 2021). In Pakistan too, initial research and media reporting have highlighted a rapid increase in DV cases during the COVID-19-related lockdowns (Khan et al, 2020).

In response to the increase in DV cases following the lockdown, widespread concern about the issue was raised worldwide through media, social media, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. The main purpose of this research is to explore—through qualitative, content analysis of media reports—the phenomenon of increased DV amidst COVID-19 lockdowns in Pakistan. While doing this we examine the media portrayal of DV cases. We intend to understand and demonstrate how the media represented issues related to DV during this period and what messages were conveyed through the media reporting of DV and COVID-19 in Pakistan. We analyze the content, which is written on DV and its interpretation, importance, preference in the media, and how it portrays women in the scenario of COVID-19. This article contributes to the existing literature by adding knowledge about the media portrayal and attention to women's and girls' issues in Pakistan amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Literature Review

Scholarly work shows that DV is likely to increase during times of uncertainty such as natural disasters (Muldoon et al, 2021; Rahman, 2013; Parkinson & Zara, 2013) and health emergencies such as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, several scholars have studied and reported escalated cases of domestic and intimate partner violence especially in countries with poor social security and inadequate support systems (e.g., Boserup, McKenney & Elkbuli, 2020; Bullinger, Carr & Packham, 2021; Kofman & Garfin, 2020; Piquero et al., 2020; Safdar & Yasmin, 2020; Sharma & Borah, 2020). Countries such as Peru and India reported a sharp increase in DV cases during the lockdown (Aguero, 2021; Vora et al., 2020).

Bullinger, Carr, and Packham (2021) and Piquero et al., (2020) noted that due to the (stay at home) policy by Texas and Chicago authorities in the USA, an increase in DV was observed during the initial weeks of the lockdown. Both studies examined DV prevalence rates, before and after the stay-at-home policy. The data from emergency response centers (911) and other hotlines were analyzed and the studies found there was an increase in DV in the first two weeks. However, rates decreased because of continuous monitoring of communication.

Likewise, a study conducted by Muldoon et al (2021) examines the changes in emergency department (ED) admissions for sexual assault and domestic violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. They analyzed observational ED admission data from The Ottawa Hospital over 62 days in 2020 and compared the data with the pre-COVID-19 situation. Surprisingly, the findings reveal a decrease in DV and assault cases during this period despite the risks that point to the increase in cases.

Boserup, McKenney, and Elkbuli (2020) have discussed the negative aspects of the lockdown and stay-at-home orders in the USA. They report that although staying at home may have contributed to reducing the spread of the virus, it may have led to social, psychological, and financial consequences. Lack of social support and isolation has increased these vulnerabilities, especially in the case of DV.

Sharma and Borah (2020) highlight the link between DV and COVID-19 and argue that the rising incidences of DV may lead to economic and social crises. They base their analysis on previous literature and the incidents of DV across the world. They argue that DV is increasing not only in numbers but also in severity. The drivers of violence include stay at home orders and financial crises. They propose changes in policy and strategies to grapple with the issue. Zhang (2020) in the context of China reports an increase in family violence as a result of lockdown measures introduced by the government. Drawing from statistical reports, reviews, and reports from media outlets, he believes family violence has increased and is emerging as a serious issue. As a result of the nationwide lockdown victims of abuse were forced to live with perpetrators.

In the context of Bangladesh, an increase in DV cases was reported by Sifat (2020). This letter to the editor acknowledges an increase in rapes and sexual assaults in the country during the lockdown. The author presents a dismal state where married women experienced torture and emotional violence at the hands of male family members. It highlights the increasing deprivation and frustration among men as a result of financial loss and lack of social activities. They expressed this stress on their wives in myriad forms including violence. The author calls the attention of state and non-state agencies including NGOs and religious groups for awareness-raising.

Similarly, in a letter to the editor, Vora et al., (2020) wrote that there is an increase in DV amid COVID-19 in India. This increase in violence was reported to be due to reasons such as lockdowns, unemployment, spending more time with families, restricted movement, and scarcity

of basic provisions, among others. In India, the National Commission for Women has reported that there is a 100 percent increase in complaints related to VAW during lockdowns (Chandra, 2020). Moreover, Agüero (2020) reported a 9% increase in cases through calls to file complaints against intimate partner violence (IPV) in Peru during the early lockdown period. This increase has been subjected to greater time spent at home with family members during lockdowns. It is also found that due to non-economic activity, IPV cases are reported.

Like other countries, in Pakistan, an increase in DV cases was reported through media reports following the lockdown (Warrach, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Pakistan on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and a complete lockdown and stay-at-home orders were exercised on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 to effectively contain the Coronavirus (Kaleem, 2020). The Sustainable Social Development Organization, which is a non-governmental organization based in Islamabad, reports that there is an increase of 200 percent in DV cases in Pakistan amidst COVID-19 (Bandial, 2020). An increase of 25% in DV was reported in eastern Punjab Province (UNDOC, 2020), while 500 DV cases were reported in Khyber Pakhtunkwa (KP) Province after the lockdown (Ahmed, 2020). In KP, 399 murder cases were reported during March 2020 alone (Baig, Ali & Tunio, 2020). In the federal capital, Islamabad, there were thousands of allegations of the torture of women (DPA International, 2020).

A study conducted by Khan et al. (2020) reports the radiological assessment of domestic violence during the lockdown. The study found a rapid increase in domestic violence cases as evident with the ratio of 50-55 cases per day with 60% of women in the radiology department with bone fractures in skulls, ribs, arms, and legs. Likewise, Safdar and Yasmin (2020) studied middle-class educated women living in urban areas and their experiences during lockdown due to COVID-19 in Pakistan. The case studies of women have shown that women faced stress and anxiety while performing their household chores because these traditional roles were not attended by them when they were at work. It is also noted that women renegotiated their identities and social space in the traditional male dominant society of Pakistan during COVID-19. Women in this study shared that there is no help provided to them that would enable them to report violence against them. However, they mentioned that they would not report against their husbands' oppressive and insulting behavior, even if a reporting system were available.

In Pakistan, DV toward women represents a significant problem (Khan & Hussain, 2008; UNODC, 2020). The country has ratified many international rights documents such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of Violence against Women (CEDAW) (1979), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) among others. In light of all these conventions, Pakistan prepared the National Plan of Action and National Policy on Development and Empowerment of Women in 2002 (The Punjab Commission on Status of Women, 2015; UNODC, 2020). However, despite these commitments, violence against women remains a significant societal issue. Common forms include honor killing, acid throwing, marital rape, gang rap, abduction and abuse of girls, abandoning newborn girls, destroying girl schools, and creating fear among working women, among others (Chandran, 2009; Zafar & Ali, 2020). The analysis of violence against women (VAW) has shown that a lack of political will, resources, and gender sensitivity are the main reasons that women maintain the status quo as victims of VAW.

An NGO working on women's rights, White Ribbon Pakistan, reported 4,734 cases of sexual violence between 2004 and 2016. Moreover, over 15,000 cases related to honor killing, 1,843 cases involving DV, and more than 5,000 kidnappings of women were also reported by the

NGO during this period. According to media reports, 51,241 cases of violence against women were reported between January 2011 and June 2017 (Bari, 2020).

Pakistan, like many other countries in the region, lacks a well-established nationwide system of reporting where women can call and complain about DV (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020). Different initiatives were taken in the past to address this issue. For instance, the Women Safety smartphone app was introduced in one of the provinces of Pakistan (Punjab) in 2018. However, according to reports (e.g., Bari, 2020), the helplines are nonfunctional and do not report. Similar observations can be made about the helpline 1099 introduced by the Ministry of Human Rights during the COVID-19 lockdown (Bari, 2020). Though it was established to provide free legal aid to women, it has largely been rendered nonfunctional.

Pakistan has an Independent National Commission on Status of Women; however, it has largely remained silent during the lockdown and failed to take any tangible measures. A look at its website shows no announcement, reporting, helpline, or any cautions set or announced by the commission. Similarly, the National Action Plan for Preparedness and Response to COVID-19 is also silent on the topic of DV, which has increased due to lockdowns, forcing women and girls to live with their abusive male relatives. This indicates a lack of sensitivity about the severity of DV in the country by the concerned authorities in Pakistan.

## Methodology

In this paper, we employed a qualitative content analysis method, which is based on naturalist inquiry and entails rigorous coding and identification of patterns and themes (Cho & Lee, 2014). Content analysis “systematically describes the meaning” of the material in light of the research objectives (Schreier, 2012, p. 3) and is frequently employed “to answer questions such as what, why and how, and the common patterns in the data are searched for” (Heikkilä & Ekman, 2003, p. 138). This helps to organize the text by using a consistent set of codes. The content analysis helps to identify and explain the key characteristics found in the text by focusing closely on who says what, to whom, and with what effect. The validity of the inference is ensured by complying with a systematic coding process (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Content analysis was deemed important for this research because of its flexibility and its ability to extract latent and manifest meanings behind the text. It helped us to look for specific information related to DV published in the articles.

### *Selection of Newspaper Articles*

The News, Dawn, and Express Tribune were selected for identifying news reports about DV between March and August 2020—a time when the lockdown had initially been enforced. These are renowned national English newspapers in Pakistan and are widely circulated and read among the educated segment of society. These are also known for their role as opinion makers and their coverage of girls’ and women’s issues from an inclusion perspective at different times including emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. We found eight articles on DV in *The News* five in *Dawn*, and two in the *Express Tribune*. Also, a Google search was conducted using the words DV, women, COVID-19, lockdown, Pakistan, Pandemic, and abuse to look for more articles about Pakistan. As a result of this search, 24 online articles focusing on DV in Pakistan were screened. These were read in detail, however, only 10, which focused on DV and COVID-19 in Pakistan during the lockdown, were finalized for in-depth reading and analysis. These were published in *Samaa News*, *Voice of America*, *Pakistan Today*, *Pakistan News.net*, *Modern*

*Diplomacy, DW, and Arab News*. Overall, a total of 25 articles were included in the analysis. All the articles were then read again carefully in light of the research objectives.

### *Data Analysis*

A summative approach to qualitative content analysis—involving both induction and deduction—was used, and data analysis began with a search for occurrences of the identified words followed by an understanding of the underlying meaning behind the text (Hsieh & Shannon 2005; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The deductive approach was used to answer the first question: how have issues related to DV been represented in Pakistani media? An unconstrained categorization matrix was developed, and open coding was carried out from the text after reading the material several times (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). During this round of reading, powerful text that depicted strong messages about DV was identified (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Through the deductive approach, existing terms and concepts related to DV were sought within the text (e.g. abuse, violence and control) (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Categorization Matrix**

How has the issue of DV been represented in Pakistani media?	Violence	Abuse	Control
	Physical (beating)	Constant Criticism	Forced Restriction of movement
	Emotional (Shouting/name calling)	Women told to clean face with bleach	Blame
	Sexual (Sex without consent)	Disliking food one cooks	Threaten
	Forced Isolation	Disapproving household chores	Control over what one wears and eats
	Women asked to isolate without symptoms	Feelings of being scared/unsafe	Intimidate/coerce

The inductive approach (Table 2) was used to answer the question: what are the messages conveyed through the media reporting of DV and COVID-19 in Pakistan? In the inductive approach needs and preferences related to DV and satisfaction from existing strategies were identified. This helped us to make sense of the text, its power, and the intended impact it could potentially have on the audience (readers). The codes were then grouped into categories and further grouped into two themes.

**Table 2: Inductive Coding**

What are the messages conveyed by the media sources?	Security	Support	Wellbeing
	Shelter homes closed	Paid leave during COVID-19	Loneliness due to isolation from the support system
	Cleanliness/hygiene in shelters	Timely registration of complaint	Inadequate Diet
	Insecure housing	Awareness/implementation of laws	Self-blame/pressure
	Home unsafe space (horrific/dangerous)	Opening Shelters with SOPS	Mental health Stress/anxiety
	Poor social services	More convictions	Sanitary napkins
	Financial constraints	Accessible Helpline	Uncertainty/frustration

During the coding process both manifest meaning such as the visible and surface content of the text, as well as the latent meanings were analyzed (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Further, a process of data reduction was involved, and it was achieved by focusing on the most relevant text (Schreier, 2012, p. 7).

### Key Findings

In what follows, we discuss the key findings. We pay close attention to the discourses used for women, the meaning behind such discourses, and the measures taken by the state to combat violence during the pandemic. Direct quotes have been used from some of the articles to retain the original meaning behind the text.

#### *Trapped Inside: Violence in Intimate Spaces*

As discussed earlier, domestic abuse is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan; many women are abused daily. Many consider this to be a family matter, with 90% of women enduring spousal abuse (Mirza, Ali & Tunio, 2020). On average, every one in four women is believed to experience emotional, physical, or sexual violence; this amounts to eight million women (Ali & Cerqueti, 2020). Pakistan’s Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) (2017-18) report that 34% of married women experience spousal physical, sexual, or emotional violence. Spousal violence is most common (i.e., 26%), followed by physical violence i.e., 23% (Amir Ud Din, 2019). However, only 2.5% end up being convicted, discouraging women from reporting such cases (Bari, 2020; Lodhi, 2020).

During the lockdown, working as well as non-working women in Pakistan were all stuck at home with their families. Those who already lived in uncomfortable and vulnerable situations had no escape from their abusers during the quarantine, and “abusers use[d] power and control to intimidate, isolate, threaten, blame and coerce the women” (Mahar, 2020). As a result, the number of DV cases increased during the lockdown (Ali & Cerqueti, 2020; Lodhi, 2020). Most of the articles showed concern for the home being an unsafe space for women during the lockdown. One news source argued:



Homes have become horrific and dangerous places for women and girls, in the course of this continuing lockdown, who have found themselves increasingly vulnerable to physical, sexual, and emotional violence. (Bandial, 2020)

This corresponds with a similar situation in other parts of the world as indicated by UN Human Rights (2020). The report shows concern that the home has transformed into a place of fear for women, leading to financial problems, restricted movement, and empowerment of the perpetrators. Poverty and dependency on men make women vulnerable to violence and abuse. Such narratives were found in most of the articles which called this an awakening call for the government (Malkani, 2020). This is especially true for low-income women who are confronted by poor access to social services and insecure housing situation. One of the articles reported a woman being beaten up by her husband because she asked for money to buy sanitary napkins. Before the COVID-19 lockdown, she could easily travel outside and purchased second-hand clothes (Bari, 2020). Similar stories were shared in other articles where women were reported to be intimidated and criticized while performing their daily chores like cleaning and cooking. One report quotes human rights activists:

Imagine living in fear of the person who shares your home. Every day is a waking nightmare of criticism, name-calling, disliking the food you cook, disapproving of your household chores, controlling what you eat and wear, and physical violence on top. Now imagine that you're trapped inside with this person while the world is grappling with an ongoing health crisis of COVID-19 (Lodhi, 2020).

As seen in the above quote, the increasing control of men over women's lives was raised as a serious issue during the lockdown and this was discussed in most of the articles. For instance, Kamal (2020) discussed the firsthand accounts of women who had experienced violence which is a clear indication of their lives being controlled to suit male hegemony. Some excerpts are taken from his report are listed below to illustrate this point:

I went out to get groceries a few days ago and when I returned, I was forced to wash my face with bleach by my husband (Sara).

Even though I have been in isolation with the family, my husband thinks I have contacted the Coronavirus and he fears that I will transmit it to our children. I do not have any symptoms, yet he has isolated me from my children. He tells them that I am sick and that I did not take precautions for the wellbeing of the family. I have now started thinking perhaps he is right or why would he do this to me? (Sama).

I spend most of my time in the kitchen where I also feel most unsafe. I am scared that if he comes into the kitchen and gets upset with me he could easily attack me with sharp items (Atifa).

These excerpts present clear evidence of men's control over women's lives. This shows that the lockdown was used as an opportunity by the abusers to manipulate women. Washing one's face with bleach is a dangerous act that could have caused serious injury, but it was used in such

a way as to justify the protection of the family. The act to isolate women from family, friends, and social support groups is cruel and a clear indication of control. It is justified in the name of protection against the disease.

None of the articles addressed attempts made by women to combat such issues. Since most women in Pakistan are financially dependent on men, and they often do not have an alternative support system, most cases remain unreported. Another reason for this is the social taboo associated with reporting private matters (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020). One of the articles explains this as follows: the fear, frustration, anxieties, and pressures which the pandemic has stirred, have found vent through acts of violence perpetrated on the bodies of women who, amidst directives of lockdown, social distancing, and isolation, have found it increasingly difficult to escape and protect themselves against abuse (Bandial, 2020).

This highlights the predicament of women who continue to be controlled and remain in abusive relationships in the absence of support. In another article, the Director of Aurat Foundation, which is a women's rights organization based in Islamabad, Mumtaz Mughal says, "Pakistan is an exceptionally patriarchal society and aggressive behavior against women at home is an endemic social issue. Such abusive behavior at home is often viewed as a private family issue and no suitable intervention and relief are provided. Unfortunately, the social and cultural values of our society are also major sources of DV against women" (Waraich, 2020).

As illustrated above, DV in Pakistan is considered a private affair which is expected to be resolved through personal negotiations. The excerpt rightly blames the socio-cultural values of society for perpetuating this act of violence. Social norms shape the perspective of women about DV and their response to it. Since social norms favor women who are submissive and endure violence silently, those who report the abuse or seek legal help are considered deviant (Amir Ud Din, 2019). Nevertheless, culture alone is not to be blamed as it is also the failure of law enforcement agencies to protect women's lives. The role of the state in addressing DV in the country, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown, is discussed further in the following theme.

### *Grievances against the State*

Several countries around the world have taken serious measures to combat violence against women. For example, Spain encourages victims of DV to ask for mask-19—a code word for seeking help—in a pharmacy to alert the authorities (Malkani, 2020). In France, women can call 3919 for help (Ahmed, 2019), and it has already opened hotels for DV victims (Godin, 2020). Likewise, in Australia, a COVID-19 Taskforce has been created with the support of the police and service providers. Courts too are actively contributing through online monitoring. In India, a WhatsApp number has been introduced by the National Commission for Women (Singh, 2020).

The Pakistani state was widely criticized for its lack of action on this issue. The government was blamed for its failure to cater to the needs of women during the pandemic. It was claimed in several articles reviewed in this study that the government has not released any data regarding the increase in DV cases, and it is unclear if any monitoring system is in place (see e.g., Babakhel, 2020; Malkani, 2020). However, reports of NGOs, lawyers, and the NCSW demonstrate that the situation is intensifying for women who are already vulnerable (Malkani, 2020). Also, the data from provisional governments such as Punjab and KP as well as the federal capital illustrate an increase in DV cases in Punjab, KP Province, and the Islamabad Capital Territory (Ahmed, 2020; DPA International, 2020). The national helpline developed by the Ministry of Human Rights was criticized for its lack of access and its failure to reach out to women living in remote areas who are in most need (Babakhel, 2020).

Further, while discussing the rise in cases of DV during the pandemic, the state was also criticized for delaying the hearing of the cases related to DV. Since most of the criminal matters had been suspended for hearing during the lockdown this had been damaging for the victims of DV. The reports asserted that such cases should be processed for virtual hearing so that the victims could be protected (Bandial, 2020). In addition to the contribution of the court, this article also reported the need to sensitize the police department in dealing with cases of DV. Such cases are often treated as personal issues that could be resolved privately. As a result, the majority of such cases remain unreported. The report suggested that media could play a role in creating awareness among the victims of domestic violence for seeking help and protection. Finally, the report emphasized the need for the implementation of DV legislation to redress the issue (Bandial, 2020).

Additionally, the significance of shelters for victims of DV was highlighted in all articles, and the state was criticized for reducing application to shelter homes during the pandemic (Ali & Cerqueti, 2020; Malkani, 2020). Shelter homes are important since these offer protection to women who have been abandoned and those who fear abuse. The application to the shelter homes has been reduced due to the fear of infection. However, this has affected women more since they depend on such services (Malkani, 2020). This concern was shared by the majority of the articles which stressed that the capacity of state-run shelters should be enhanced to accommodate more victims, while SOPs such as maintaining 6 feet distance, wearing masks, and washing hands should be adopted to ensure the health and safety of residents (Ali & Cerqueti, 2020). It was suggested that neighborhood watch committees be instituted at every union council level to facilitate the detection of cases of DV. This is a practical solution that could facilitate the government in reporting cases of DV. However, such committees should be recruited with caution as these would need to gain the trust of women in reporting such cases.

In addressing the issue of DV, the government was also criticized for the ban on public transportation. It was argued that the unavailability of transport could make it much more difficult for women to leave abusive homes (Babakhel, 2020). Moreover, some of the reports also considered the significance of measures to rehabilitate women in the post-COVID-19 world by providing them the space to speak up and to access legal aid. The government was urged to take an active role in the rehabilitation process and to encourage data sharing on a priority basis (Lodhi, 2020). Also, women who are experiencing abuse and trauma during the lockdown need support. Introducing a helpline carries a strong message that the state cares for the safety of women citizens, but a lot of hard work and brainstorming is needed as to how to make it accessible for the underprivileged women who may not have access to phones. Especially during the pandemic, women cannot leave their homes and are controlled by their abusers within intimate spaces. So, under such circumstances how to reach out to them and assist them is a challenge that continues to be faced by the Pakistani government.

## **Discussion**

The articles in this study depicted DV as a woman's issue perpetrated by men. The images illustrated in the articles evidence the violence over women's bodies and their inability to resist. Men were often termed as perpetrators, monsters, and abusers while women were largely represented as 'victims' in desperate need of help and who are unable to resist and retaliate. These narratives show that media presents women as individuals who lack agency, who are victims of patriarchal control, and who need to be rescued by the state and human rights activists. However,

we argue that women even in deeply patriarchal societies have the agency to resist and defy (Ali, 2016; Zafar & Ali, 2020).

While combating DV, women should be an active part of the process. They should not be treated as victims waiting to be rescued but as agents who are an active part of the process (Kabeer, 1994; Zafara & Ali, 2020). The media has a key role to play here as an opinion maker. While they are contributing by highlighting the issue, in the long run, these narratives can be internalized and normalized in a society where patriarchy is already deeply rooted. Hence, where on one hand, the media represent the reality experienced in societies, on the other, the media has the power to change the behavior of individuals (Ali & Batool, 2015). The media should be engaged in debates to represent women's voices as active citizens with agency of their own. This could be done through reporting success stories of survivors of violence and also through television dramas and commercials which are widely accessible and watched across the country. This is one measure that could play an important role to combat DV in the post-COVID-19 period.

An important finding in this analysis was increased stress, anxiety, frustration, fear, and depression as a result of DV reported through the excerpts. Research conducted by Safdar and Yasmin (2020) also report stress and anxiety among educated middle-class professional women in Pakistan as they experienced the lockdown. Despite being professionally educated women, they were unaware of the support available to victims of DV. Interestingly, they denied seeking help if required as they considered the stress and anxiety related to DV a domestic and personal issue which they prefer not to report. This clearly suggests that women in Pakistan are often not willing to seek help even if it is available.

Several of the structural drivers for DV include patriarchy, lack of economic empowerment, and legislation. Women's mobility is restricted in the name of protection against COVID-19; they are blamed for being a potential source of infection and a threat to the family. Some are isolated forcefully from their children and support system resulting in loneliness. Violence can be seen in the form of constant criticism, intimidation, and disapproval of daily chores. The pressure, accusations, and criticism resulted in self-blame, stress, anxiety, and a situation of endless uncertainty and distress.

The online reports on DV and COVID-19 largely speak of the inadequate support system and absence of measures taken in Pakistan to combat this issue. There seems to be a realization that DV has been increased, but measures taken to combat it are inadequate. Almost all online sources criticized the government for its lack of interest in addressing women's issues, especially at a challenging time. The government strategies too were largely intended to provide access through the helpline. The helpline introduced by the Human Rights Commission seems to be symbolic and has flaws. It is inaccessible to the majority of the potential victims of DV living in remote areas of the country. These people live in vulnerable conditions such as in insecure housing and under the strict surveillance of the abusers. In addition, by closing shelter homes for women, the government has shown a lack of genuine interest in facilitating and rehabilitating the victims of DV. Initiatives such as the Women Safety smartphone app introduced in Punjab Province in 2018 and the helplines introduced recently are nonfunctional, or women do not report. Some of these findings correspond with previous studies in the Pakistani context which acknowledge that the country does not have a well-established system of reporting for women to approach authorities (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020).

## Conclusions and Implications

This paper examined the representation of DV in Pakistani media during the initial lockdowns as a result of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. We were also interested to find out what messages were conveyed through the media reporting of DV in the country during this time period. The analysis of the newspaper articles indicates that women were portrayed as passive and voiceless individuals who lack agency. The analysis of the newspaper articles demonstrated that women were reported as trapped inside their homes as a result of the lockdown, often with the perpetrators of DV and unable to escape violence. Women were depicted as scared and vulnerable due to their inability to leave their homes due to the fear of COVID-19 infection and closure of offices. The grievances against the Pakistani State were highlighted in several news articles, and it emerged as a key finding. Measures taken by several states across the world were presented and compared with the attempts made by the Pakistani state in combatting DV during the lockdowns. In this regard, the Pakistani state was criticized for its lack of action on this issue. Shelter homes were closed, public transport was banned, and cases related to DV were delayed. It was reported that the Pakistani state had not released any data on DV, and an effective monitoring system was not in place to deal with the situation.

The analysis in this paper also demonstrated that though the newspaper articles had raised the issue of DV in reference to the lockdowns, the messages conveyed through the media were masculine, hegemonic, and reduced the very existence of women as subjects of abuse and neglect. The discourses used in the newspaper articles were biased and conveyed the meaning that women are voiceless and lack agency. Taking a feminist lens in this paper allows us to argue that women can always resist not necessarily by openly defying but through subtle acts of negotiation. We think there is need for the media to present narratives of those women who have been able to negotiate and resist.

In light of the above analysis, it can be argued that DV is emerging as a silent pandemic that poses a serious challenge to Pakistani society and the Pakistani state. Efforts are needed to address this in the larger framework of Pakistan's commitment to gender equality. Pakistan is keen to play its role in eliminating gender discrimination through its commitment to platforms such as CEDAW. The Pakistani laws give equal rights to both men and women irrespective of their gender, class, and religious affiliations. This commitment should be enforced and implemented in the true spirit. However, as discussed above, women are still considered second-class citizens controlled by men. To address this, a strong mechanism is needed to reach out to those being victimized and manipulated within the intimate spaces. Further research is needed to understand the cultural dynamics that restrict women from reporting DV. We need to know why women are unable or unwilling to reach out to the authorities through the helplines.

Fulfilling the basic needs of women workers during a pandemic may also reduce cases related to DV. State resources should be available in the form of legal aid and employment opportunities, especially during emergencies. Women engaged in small business and low-paid work could be supported through paid leave. An additional \$20.8 million was allocated by the Australian government to tackle the DV issue during COVID-19 (Wyeth, 2020). The same measures are needed in Pakistan to tackle the situation. In the longer term, more tangible measures are needed through state interventions such as access to education, protection, and financial independence (Lodhi, 2020). Court courses related to DV must be expedited to avoid out-of-court settlements, and urgent protective measures should be taken at the advocacy level (Mirza et al., 2020).

Importantly, women need to understand violence and abuse as acts beyond normal personal relations. They need to know that it is not alright for men to control their lives, to abuse them, and to treat them in a way that may make them uncomfortable. Women also need access to secure shelters to empower them to speak about DV. They would never speak under circumstances where they may have to return to live with the abusers. Since previous strategies are inadequate, we also need to think of alternative strategies to redress the issue. There is a strong need for the active role of the community support system, neighbors, and civil society (Aga, 2020). Engaging community volunteers, neighbors, lady health workers, and teachers could provide some solutions to redress the issue. Hence, awareness and realization together with support and access may empower women to reach out to authorities. Since DV has become normalized and is deeply rooted in society, gender sensitization is needed in institutions such as police, judiciary, and ministries to address the issue, and training is needed for recognizing DV cases as family cases. Media could play a role by offering ongoing monitoring instead of focusing on high-profile cases from time to time.

Finally, this study was based on an analysis of secondary sources for examining how the issue of DV is portrayed in media and what messages are being conveyed during the lockdowns related to the first wave of COVID-19. We couldn't include all newspapers published in Pakistan in this analysis. In particular, the newspapers which are published in the national language Urdu and regional languages such as Pashto, Punjabi, and Sindhi were not included in the sample. Also, we did not include the discourses related to DV in social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and others. In contemporary Pakistan, social media has emerged as a very powerful source to share ideas and opinions about social issues including DV. Further research can be conducted in these areas to examine how social media and the newspapers published in local languages portray DV. In addition, empirical studies can be conducted to understand women's experiences of DV during the lockdowns in the country.

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