

# **PACIFIC JOURNAL OF MEDICAL SCIENCES**

**{Formerly: Medical Sciences Bulletin}**

**ISSN: 2072 – 1625**



**Pac. J. Med. Sci. (PJMS)**

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## **SITUATION ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN FIJI**

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*Submitted: March 2023; Accepted: April 2023*

## SITUATION ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN FIJI

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### ABSTRACT:

COVID-19, a highly contagious and deadly virus rapidly swept across the world from the year 2019 to 2020 killing more than two million people. Due to the magnitude of affect the virus was having, governments were forced into taking measures that required isolation of the infected from the unaffected, as mitigation to halt the spread. This brought about the “COVID-19 Lockdown”. Though the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) were with one of the least numbers of COVID-19 cases, similar measures were implemented as measure to prevent the virus from entering the countries. Like other countries, PICs like Fiji had a lockdown and this affected the lifestyles of the people. Amidst the lockdown, there was a rise in domestic violence cases. The literature review was done using databases; Medline, ProQuest, Embase, and Scopus. The research was done by using the relevant keywords in the field of COVID-19 which was aimed specifically on domestic violence during the pandemic. Moreover, local, and international publications, like media reports and published reports were also used. Upon carrying out this research it could be stated that there was a rise in the number of domestic violence cases in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The literature review was aimed at identifying the consequences of COVID-19 and why it triggered a spike in domestic violence cases. The study concluded that the psychological impacts, and socio-economic state created as the result of the lockdown was the main contributing factor which gives rise to substance abuse, depression, which collectively lead to violence.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Lockdown, Domestic Violence, Impacts, Causes, Fiji, Pacific

### INTRODUCTION:

In January 2020, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)-Cov-2, Coronavirus was announced by the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDCP), as the causative agent/pathogen for a number of novel

pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province. Later the World Health Organization (WHO) named it Coronavirus disease of the year 2019 (COVID-19) [1]. In a few months COVID-19 had rapidly spread worldwide and on March 11 of the year 2020, WHO declared the disease as a

controllable pandemic disease [2-3]. COVID-19 has rapidly become one of the leading causes of death by an infectious disease. Current rates of the prevalence for the diseases stand higher than diseases like diabetes and other non-infectious/ Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs).

There have been 759,408,703 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 6,866,434 deaths, reported to WHO as of February 27th, 2023[4]. Indicative figures of the death rate compared to the number infected by the virus, it is evident that COVID-19 has a low mortality rate, during late 2020, the emergence of variants that posed an increased risk to global public health prompted the characterization of specific Variants of Interest (VOIs) and Variants of Concern (VOCs), in order to prioritize global monitoring and research, and ultimately to inform the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. The virus is primarily spread through human-to-human contact and airborne droplets has forced the governments around the globe to introduce measures such as limiting contact between people, banning social gatherings, shutting down or reducing non-essential services, and quarantine. These measures are in place as a mitigation to slow down and potentially halt the spread of the virus [6]. The measure taken proved to be effective at controlling the virus but this at the same time has tremendously affected the livelihood of people [7].

According to given statistical data provided by the United Nations, it said that one in three women experience Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The impact of domestic violence on the females affects their performance in both the work environments and personal settings. Moreover, IPV impacts the victim's mental health, earnings, and child health. According to United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), one of most prevalent human rights violations around the world is violence against women and girls [7]. Violence based on gender, or Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is one of the most silenced issues, mainly for cultural reasons. GBV can result in health consequences including severe injuries resulting in disabilities as well as mental health issues such as depression, suicide, reproductive health and also usher unwanted or forced pregnancy, which in turn may lead to unsafe abortion practices, mainly in regions that do not legalize abortions [8]. The causes of domestic violence vary, but one of the most prominent causes of domestic violence is due to the psychological state of the assailant. Mental health conditions, stress, economic and political conditions are mainly the reasons given by the assailants in their defense [9].

The lockdowns imposed since 2020 have forced the people of all backgrounds to be confined in their residences (except medical workers). Consequently, to keep the pandemic at bay, measures that limit population mobility and within-

population contact rates should be considered in affected areas. These include school closures, bans of gatherings, work-from-home covenants, and the most draconian measure, curfews, and total system shut-downs. This concept is also known as "flattening the curve", which involves decreasing and delaying an epidemic's peak to avoid overstressing the capacity of healthcare systems [10]. While the combination of risk area travel bans, school closures, bans of gatherings, and border closure leads to a decrease in the growth rate by 10.3 percentage points, the combination of all individual measures (including a national curfew) reduces the growth rate of confirmed COVID-19 cases by 16.4 percentage points [7]. The lockdown successfully slowed the virus but at the same time slowed down the economic growth internationally as developing countries were most affected, and a significant number of the population had lost their jobs and were forced into isolation. This in turn triggered a decline in the mental health conditions/ psychology of many people that were affected by the lockdown, mainly due to the effect the lockdown had on the financial aspects of their lives mainly in developing countries [10]. This was also seen in several families in South Africa have been impacted financially due to the closure of business which led to the temporary/ permanent unemployment of some breadwinners in the families. This also has had a cascading impact on

the food security of families and their ability to afford other basic necessities. Distress as a result of financial challenges or failure to provide for the family alongside spending much time locked down together as a family has also led to violence in the family. This was further exacerbated by the fact that the victims were stuck with the abusers, and some could not report or find help due to the restricted movements [8].

The Pacific region is a region that is dotted with a number of developing countries. The Pacific, being one the most visited regions in the globe due to its tourism, weighed a risk for the virus to enter the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). In order to avoid COVID-19 becoming a health crisis, measures were adopted to help mitigate this risk. Border lockdowns and movement of people in the country were reduced, which in turn severely affected international trade, tourism, and remittance [11].

Fiji is one of the developing countries located in the South Pacific that went under a period of total lockdown during the peak of the global pandemic. Fiji recorded its first COVID-19 case on the 19th of March 2020, and border restrictions and self-quarantine measures were implemented [12]. On the 5th of June Fiji was declared COVID free after clearing the last COVID-19 patient [13]. Just as Fiji's economy started to pick up from 2020's hardships, the nation was yet again plunged into another round of lockdowns. On 17 April 2021,

the Fijian Government announced a resurgence of COVID-19 positive cases in the country. Although Fiji had previously been able to contain the first COVID-19 outbreak in the year 2020, the 2nd wave has been more rampant with severe ramifications to our nation and the economy. In the year 2021, parts of the nation remain under containment (restricted movement within zones), businesses are trying to reopen under stringent new COVID-19 protocols and Fiji's citizens were under revised curfew hours [35]. Thus, this review of literature aims at exploring the reason as to how the COVID-19 crisis had an effect on the rate of domestic violence cases on the Fiji at that period, and what factors were brought about by the lockdown that caused such an issue.

#### **METHODOLOGY:**

This review of literature aimed at the particulars of COVID-19, mainly in relation to the lockdown brought about by the pandemic. It focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown affected the prevalence of domestic violence cases in Fiji, with comparisons, and conclusions drawn from international reports and publications. Four databases were used to search for the relevant publications pertaining to the topic of COVID-19 Lockdown and Domestic Violence including Medline, Scopus, Embase, and ProQuest. The keywords used were (Factors OR determinants OR consequence) AND (COVID-19, OR

Coronavirus) AND (“Domestic Violence” OR “Gender Based Violence”, OR “Intimate Partner Violence”), AND (“Fiji” OR “Globe”). Local media publications were also used.

#### **RESULTS:**

Three themes were identified that escalated during the COVID-19 lockdown, and in turn affected the rate of domestic violence cases in Fiji. The themes are Unemployment and Domestic Violence, Alcohol during Lockdown, Sexual Abuse and Marital Rape.

Theme 1: Unemployment and domestic violence: During the time of the global pandemic, millions of people around the world were put into lockdown as a measure to mitigate the spread of the virus by limiting social interaction/ practice of social distancing [10]. Given the COVID-19 crisis, most tourism businesses are pessimistic (62 percent) about the future of their business. This is likely due to the pandemic's early impact on the tourism industry and the effects of international travel restrictions. Most non-tourism businesses (77 percent) are either optimistic or uncertain about the survival of their business [6]. According to CNN Business, New York, it is estimated that about 60% of the businesses that were closed due to the COVID lockdown may never open again [19]. Such a crisis ushered in a sudden increase in the amount of unemployment in the globe [19].

The widespread loss of jobs resulted in a widespread loss of income which had severe impact on the lives of people, mainly low-income earning families [19].

A surge in domestic violence coincided with the rise of unemployment around the globe. There was a substantial increase in domestic violence worldwide and the United Nations dubbed it a “Shadow Pandemic” alongside the COVID-19 pandemic [18]. Unemployment in a family creates various emotional mechanisms in the minds of individuals (psychological impact) due to loss of income [19].

Being a country that earns heavily out of tourism, Fiji relied greatly on a business sector that dealt with massive social interaction. The COVID-19 Lockdown affected the tourism sector and many workers had to be sent home [6]. This in turn affected the household incomes of many Fijian families. Being a developing country Fiji has a significantly high population living below the poverty line i.e. earning an income that is less than 15,000 per year [36]. Families were put in tremendous financial strain, and as a measure to ensure survival, the Fiji National Provident Fund began issuing assistance to people going through unemployment [37]. This chain of events had a negative impact on the mental states of the people.

In a cultural societal setting where the male is seen as the dominant force, loss of job in male

population impacts the “dignity” of the male in the family. This can be termed a type of ‘male backlash’. This is due to the change in the earnings of a man in such gender stereotypical settings. Moreover, due to the more time partners would spend time together, there is more exposure for conflicts arising from petty disagreements (which would also be fueled with stress), and more room for violent sexual demands and interactions that in turn may result in marital rape [38].

Fiji is a country that is modernizing, however there is still a significant preservation of culture. Households where the males are seen as the leader of the family is not an uncommon sight. Settings of significant domestic violent incidents are in such households. Even in households with both working individuals, males losing their job results in more controversy [43]. This in scenario where the male dominant in the house tries to control the income of the female/ or the other half. Such scenarios may lead to disagreement and conflict which gives way for violent retaliation as means to withhold “authority” in a family [39].

Theme 2: Alcohol and violence during Crisis:

The lockdown brought about severe economic impact on the businesses around the world [40]. One of the most affected sectors was the alcohol market. Alcohol is a commodity that heavily depends on other businesses, particularly

businesses that deal with “socializing”. With a ban on social gatherings, the major buyers of liquor were affected [20]. Bars, restaurants, night clubs, and hotels were closed during the lockdown, thus affecting the liquor industry. With the demand for alcohol experiencing a sudden decrease, the price for alcohol decreased with it [29]. The decrease in the price of alcohol was targeted for the tourism sector, however the general public had taken advantage of it [41]. In an interview with local media, the coordinator of Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, Shamima Ali, expressed concerns on the drop of alcohol prices. Ms. Ali stated that during the COVID-19 restrictions, there has been conflicts between partners over their alcohol spending. She stated that the drop would only aggravate the situation [21].

Alcohol has long been used as an escape from stress. It is a widely accepted social practice in society for people to consume alcohol as a means to relieve stress and anxiety. This is due to the way alcohol affects the body. Alcohol dampens / reduces the physiological stress response of the body [22]. With the global pandemic, and the economic decline, stress and anxiety has increased among people, especially among low-income earners [42]. The decrease in the price of alcohol in a way encouraged the buying of alcohol to be used as an escape from the situation [21]. Besides the drop in the prices of alcohol,

according to the WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol, data collected from National Nutrition Survey 2011, show that consumption of alcoholic home brew is very common and widespread in Fiji [26]. This in turn raises concern as home brews usually contain an unmonitored level of alcohol which is mostly three times the commercially produced alcohol content [26]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), alcohol has a strong link with the occurrence of intimate partner violence [23]. Studies in the United States of America and England show that 55% and 32% of victims of intimate partner violence respectively, believe their partner were under the influence of alcohol respectively.

The consumption of alcohol can have a direct link with two major factors: low socio-economic status, and impulsive personality [23].

Theme 3: Intimate partner violence and gender-based violence:

According to the United Nations Population Fund, there was an estimate that the COVID-19 pandemic had the potential to cause an additional 15 million new cases of Gender Based Violence cases worldwide with each additional 3 months of lockdown [30][7]. This derived from the 20% increase in domestic violence during the lockdown [30]. The factors that arise during the lockdown can be split into three reasons; The elements or situations trigger the perpetrators, limited support

to keep violence at bay, and the increase in the time spent (exposure to perpetrators) [25].

The triggers for perpetrators to succumb to violence are mainly to do with psychological and economic factors brought about by the lockdown [30]. The two main triggers for perpetrators during the lockdown is stress from the COVID-19 crisis, and the increased consumption of alcohol. The global pandemic has shaken the world economy including that of Fiji, which heavily relied on the tourism sector. According to the Fiji COVID-19 Business Survey 2020, the earnings from tourism sector has decreased by a staggering 59 % during the COVID-19 lockdown [31]. This in turn has given a sudden rise in unemployment which has put a strain on the family's socio-economic statuses, especially those in poverty. This factor has increased the stress in the population that directly and indirectly affects the surge in domestic violence figures. Stress is one of the leading motivators for sexual abuse this is further exacerbated by the patriarchal culture and gender norms inherent in the Fijian societies [43].

With the implementing of the lockdown, the access to the support services for the vulnerable population was reduced, and to none in remote parts of Fiji. Moreover, with authorities designated more to avoiding the spread of the virus, there was more room for the occurrence of violence [43].

Furthermore, the stigma associated with reporting sexual abuse cases influences a limitation, as cultural constraints created by aristocratic societies limiting women and girls to report cases dealing with sexual abuse and marital rape. This also goes for gender-based violence where homosexuals and bisexuals are being stereotyped and abused in settings with little to no service to support them [39]. Additionally, children were more exposed to being caught in the violence during the lockdown. This being due to the schools being closed. Children at home get victimized by impending conflict between parents [38].

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), the organization's that looks into the cases of domestic violence in Fiji, saw a 300% increase in the cases of domestic violence during the COVID-19 period [45].

The following is data from the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre on the total number of reported domestic violence cases or cases related to domestic abuse for the years of 2019 and 2020, this data goes on to show that due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures many women and children were not able to register their cases with the police due to no movement which inhibited them seeking help from friends and families thus the end result was silent suffering [45].



<b>YEAR</b>	<b>CASES</b>
2019	833 cases
2020	718 cases

Source: FWCC

#### Number of calls per month 2020

<b>Month</b>	<b>Calls</b>
February	87
March	187
April	527

Source: FWCC

The generalized data given above shows the total cases for the respective years, however as per the FWCC, the months of March 2020, and April 2020 saw a stark increase in the number of calls recorded in their toll free helpline which is indicative of the fact that there were many issues of domestic violence but due to fear of the outbreak and lockdown measures the help seeking behavior part was missing [45].

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the rate of domestic violence cases. COVID-19 lockdown

has brought about a shadow crisis along with the pandemic crisis that is in the form of domestic violence. Upon the reviewing of published literature, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 lockdown brought about significant factors in livelihoods of families that contributed to an increase in the number of domestic violence cases. One of the major factors brought about by the lockdown was the unemployment situation. Unemployment has tremendously affected the family income which has led to stress. The events have also led to an increase in substance abuse which also in turn contributes to violence. This was

made worse in Fiji with the decrease in alcohol prices giving rise to more alcohol consumption. Further research is needed to determine the significance of the amount alcohol consumption by the population as an important driver in relation to the number of domestic violence cases. Political will and intervention are needed to address the drop in the prices of alcohol beverages, especially during lockdowns. This then further needs to be translated into effective policies and plans to mitigate domestic violence during pandemics as such and the impact and relationship of loss of income to stress and to alcohol consumption. Furthermore, research is also needed to gauge the perceptions of those that were victims of abuse during the pandemic in Fiji, this would give an insight to the realities they faced during the crisis and what they did in terms of seeking help.

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