CULTURAL STUDIES | CRITICAL ESSAY

Marital Stress and Domestic Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Marital stress and domestic violence is prevalent in every society around the world. It has become a major concern during the Covid-19 pandemic. Governments have resorted to lockdown measures in order to contain the pandemic. The pandemic has made the weaker and more vulnerable people in a household more exposed to abusive partners. Social isolation and home confinement have detrimental effects on one’s mental and physical well-being. Women have been shown to be at a very high risk from violence during The Covid—19 pandemic. The research paper aims to understand the factors which compel women to stay in abusive and stressful marriages and the ways in which they can be empowered to lead their life with dignity and self-respect. The cultural contexts of most societies force women to stay in abusive marriages as the woman is often portrayed as the symbol of unity in families. Understanding the cultural bindings of women trapped in abusive households during the COVID-19 pandemic is a very crucial aspect as this can help in understanding the fear and apprehensions of women trapped in destructive marriages. This can be a key factor which can make it easier for support groups while providing counselling and other kinds of support to women trapped in abusive marriages. The paper also discusses the impact of abusive relationships on children and how it negatively shapes their personality and their emotional well-being.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Marital Stress and Domestic Violence against women has become a major concern for societies around the world. It has become the responsibility of common citizens to be aware of these issues as it puts the lives of many women in extreme danger. Therefore, it is not just governments and authorities which have the responsibility to protect women from marital violence, but citizens around the world need to be aware and sensitive about marital violence so that common citizens can also be equipped enough to reach out to women who are in extreme danger. Marital violence has been on the rise in India and around the world during the Covid-19 pandemic as there was more scope for abusers to inflict fear and violence on women due to social isolation and home confinement rules. Marital violence also has long lasting impact on children trapped in violent homes.
Subjects: Feminist Psychology; Multidisciplinary Psychology; General Psychology; Counseling Psychology; Mental Health; Gender

Keywords: marital stress; domestic violence; cultural bindings; emotional well-being; pandemic

1. Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the lives of many across the world. The global pandemic has its repercussions on all the countries and at various levels. The health, education and economy are at a very volatile stage. At an individual level, families are facing one of the toughest times with financial and health insecurity being a harsh reality. With people being locked up in their homes for months, there have been several reports showing strained marital relationship and more cases of domestic violence (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). Financial insecurity and a completely new way of functioning has pushed everybody to learn a lot about compromise and adjustment. However, it has also made already weaker and vulnerable people in a household much more exposed and defenseless to their abusers. It has also pushed many to be abusive. Therefore, the power dynamics in some of the families has undergone certain changes which has the potential to be very dangerous. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed everyone to home confinement and social isolation. The impact of social isolation and home confinement can be seen in the form of detrimental effects on the mental health and physical well-being in people. The increased isolation seemed to have impacted the office workers quite badly as increased on-screen time has a negative impact on one's sleep pattern and has also reduced one's physical activity. Disturbed sleep pattern has a very negative impact on one's physical health and emotional well-being. (Majumdar et al., 2020). Therefore, the impact of disturbed sleep and a lack of activities to take part in and also increased work timings can disturb one's emotional and physical well-being. This can in turn affect the manner in which one interacts with family, colleagues etc. Another study by Carroll et al. 2020 shows how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the health, financial security, food security and stress among families in Canada. The study was conducted on families within the income range of middle to high-income groups. Key factors which were identified in the study which led to increased stress within the families were balancing work with child care, home schooling, increased financial instability and increased amount of time spent in household chores. The study shows how the stress and increased responsibilities have led to unhealthy behaviors and maladaptive coping strategies. Trougakos et al. 2020 conducted a study which shows how fear and apprehension about contracting the COVID-19 pandemic has its impact on work, home and health. The main feature which emerged while conducting the study was that emotion suppression was identified as a common factor which had detrimental effects on the individual. This was seen as having a critical impact on an individual’s ability to work effectively and to engage effectively with one’s family and also has drastic impact on personal health. Parents experienced high level of stress and mood changes. The health and learning pattern in children have also changed during the pandemic. The level of changes experienced within the family, at work and with children have increased and this aspect has put several parents under extreme stress and anxiety (Brown et al., 2020). Therefore, the emotional and physical stress due to home confinement and social isolation can cause stress in relationships within as well as outside one’s family, it leads to changes in one’s physical and mental health and in the case of already strained and vulnerable relationships, it can cause more stress and strain. Emotional and physical discomfort can turn some relationships into abusive ones as well thus resulting in domestic violence.

A study by Ertan et al. 2020 show that with Covid-19 pandemic, the number of cases of domestic violence has increased around the world. The studies show that the home confinement rules implemented to break the Covid chain has increased the risks of domestic violence in many households. The pandemic has caused financial insecurity, health insecurity and various other problems which can trigger more violence in already abusive households. Study shows that there are reported as well as unreported cases of physical, financial and sexual abuse of women in
Bangladesh which has increased during the pandemic (Sifat, 2020). Several studies have been conducted to understand the rise in cases of domestic violence during the pandemic. Some of the factors which contribute towards domestic violence are increasing layoffs, loss of income, extended home confinement due to the lockdown rules. This has become a huge crisis for governments across the world and it has also led to a drastic decrease in productivity of the workforce. (Sharma & Borah, 2020). A series of studies conducted in the United States have been reviewed by Kofman and Garfin in 2020. The studies reveal how the stay at home orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic had forced several victims of domestic violence to stay with their abusers for indefinite periods. A study by Tolan in 2020 reports that after the first month of the lockdown, around nine major metropolitan cities reported a 20–30% increase in the Domestic Violence Service Calls. Study also shows the distressing accounts given by abusers where they justify the use of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic as a method to instill fear in their partners (Godin, 2020). Therefore, the pandemic has given more reasons and favorable situational factors for abusive partners in a relationship. There are households where the pandemic has become a reason why family members finally interact with each other. In some cases, this helps to enhance the quality of relationships within a family. However, in families where there are abusive patterns, the home confinement and social isolation can be very dangerous to the victims.

The research paper is an attempt to explore the factors which compel women to stay in abusive and stressful marriages and the ways in which they can be empowered to lead their life with dignity and self-respect. Women have been always seen as an integral part of any family unit with the sole responsibility of taking care of the entire household. Although they contribute indirectly to a household’s income, that is never actually accounted. This itself is a symbol of the extent to which women have been taken for granted by the society. The cultural contexts of most societies force women to stay in abusive marriages as the woman is often portrayed as the symbol of unity in families. The cultural context which allows the abuse of women within a marriage is the patriarchal bargaining framework according to Chaudhuri et al. (2014). The study shows the helplessness of women in abusive marriages as their efforts to oppose the abuser never get heard in the patriarchal setting which gives the man complete authority over his wife. The study has been conducted on South Asian immigrant population in the United States. When patriarchy sanctions the use of violence on women as a method to keep them under the society's control and expectations, women are left powerless to defend themselves. A study conducted on immigrant Vietnamese families in America by Bui and Morash in the year 1999 show that abusive marriages have been sanctioned by traditional beliefs in the role of women and the traditional family values. These traditions have compelled several Vietnamese American women to stay in abusive marriages despite being economically independent. A study conducted in Pakistan shows that there are intrinsic factors as well as extrinsic factors which encourage domestic violence in marriages. Intrinsic factors which are found within individuals have been identified as those which either make an individual vulnerable to be abused or make the person abusive in nature. The extrinsic factors which support violence against women is the prevalence of patriarchy and its sanctioning of violence in Pakistan as well as in its neighboring countries. The cultural influence of normalizing violence has made it convincing enough for both victims as well as abusers to accept violence in relationships as a sanctioned way of functioning in societies (Ali & Gavino, 2008). Therefore, the cultural framework is quite a powerful factor in dictating the terms in a married woman's life. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the responsibility of taking care of one's family has increased and has left many women over-burdened. This intern impacts their energy level and efficacy. In households where the women get blamed for their slightest mistakes, the pandemic has definitely made it tougher and more dangerous for them. The increased hours in tending to children, increasing household chores and taking care of elderly people in families have increased the burden on the women of households across the globe (Power, 2020).

Families which have a history of discriminating women, couples with already existing marital issues and families which are abusive in nature towards women are certain family scenarios where the women are at an increased risk due to longer work hours at home and over
exhaustion from responsibilities. In such scenarios, there is a greater tendency for the women to get subjected to higher stress as well as to increased physical and emotional abuse. The patriarchal framework where the women are held responsible for ensuring the unity and peace within a family forces many women to remain silent while being abused as they fear the blame will ultimately fall on them. Therefore, the cultural factor is a very strong reason which compels women stay in abusive marriages. The personal health, safety and comfort of women are often sacrificed in the name of the larger picture so that it does not tarnish the image of her family. The societal norms, pressure from one’s families, children etc tie up most women to their abusers. The saddest part of the story is that the safety and well-being of women in such scenarios have never been a concern. It has always been about the well-being of the family, children and particularly that of husbands. Women have been conditioned from childhood that they are the sacrifiers in a family and that they will have to endure every hardship as it is their duty as a woman. The duty and virtue of a woman has been an image which is quite visible in different cultural contexts across the world. This age- old virtue associated with women have made it difficult for a woman to escape the scrutiny of her roles and commitment towards the well-being of her marital home. The woman is expected to fulfill multiple roles at one time. The overburden and its impact on the woman’s health has never been a concern in our societies. The traditional patriarchal system had only made it convenient for men to abuse women for centuries. This tradition has not faded away despite the fact that women are getting educated today. Even educated and financially independent women in certain communities have been forced to stay in abusive marriages for the sake of traditional belief systems and societal norms. Unity of a family is unfortunately seen solely as a woman’s responsibility. The cultural belief systems have tied women and have compelled them to stay in marriages where their safety is also at stake. The patriarchal framework has been convincing women to be normal about abusive marriages and does not make the abusers feel guilty either. The psychological framework of a woman has been conditioned to endure all the hardships. Therefore, in order to stand up against the violence, the women who are trapped in abusive and stressful marriages need help to accept the situation and to understand that it is not their fault. Often the woman gets blamed for the abuse that happens to her. Therefore, the cultural and traditional factors and their role in aggravating abusive relationships in the society needs to be communicated effectively with the victims as this would play a huge role in helping them understand that whatever happened is not their fault. The process of unlearning all those traditional beliefs and societal norms requires a lot of constant therapeutic help to the women as it has been grilled into their system from the time of their birth. Identifying these factors and its role in trapping women in abusive marriages can be an eye opener for most women and can be the first step in gaining perspective and awareness about the situation. The process can be quite overwhelming emotionally and it can be a challenging one for therapists as it not easy to break down already learnt belief systems and thinking patterns in a session or two. Along with sessions it is also essential to empower women to become financially independent in case they are not. Therefore, the research paper proposes a theory that just addressing domestic violence and marital stress during the pandemic alone is not sufficient, understanding the cultural reason which has encouraged abusive marriages for centuries and understanding the psychological make up of women who endanger their own safety for the sake of their abusive and stressful marriages, so that they can be given appropriate guidance and help in breaking away from abusive marriages. Providing constant guidance and proper rehabilitation facilities and skills is also crucial while helping them come out of abusive marriages. A strong focus on the coping mechanisms which can be used to strengthen the self-confidence and skills in women should be a huge criteria while providing them with help and assistance in rebuilding their lives. Establishing support groups for women which will be operational irrespective of any situation is one of the crucial steps to ensure the well-being of women. Therefore, one of the most important factors in empowering women is to provide them with the right guidance and counselling. This research paper is an attempt to understand how cultural factor have hindered women from standing up against abuse and the ways in which they can rebuild their lives and lead a life filled with dignity and self-respect.
Studies have been carried out across the globe during the pandemic in order to understand the impact of the pandemic on the family as well as on how it affects one's performance at work. A study conducted in Germany by (Möhring et al., 2020) explores how the changes in the work settings impact families, especially parents. The results of the study conducted showed that for couples with children and for couples without children there was a significant decrease experienced in family satisfaction. This can be attributed to multiple responsibilities which comes with working from home and managing responsibilities. However, this also poses a risk as decreased family satisfaction can make it difficult for a couple and can definitely cause stress and strain in a marital relationship if the home confinement and social isolation continues for a prolonged period. Going out to one's place of work and interacting with more people usually acts as stress busters for many people. However, in the current situation, with additional responsibilities and complete isolation and home confinement, one's regular pattern of dealing with stress has been forced to be altered. Therefore, this has definitely caused more inconvenience and strain for individuals. The results of the study show that couples irrespective of whether they have children or not have experienced a general decrease in family satisfaction. This is an indicator of the strain and stress the pandemic has caused in marital relationships.

A study by Reizer, Koslowsky and Geffen in the year 2020 on Israeli women in order to understand their perceptions around the Pandemic and their biggest concern during this period. The major findings from the study conducted on Israeli women showed that they experienced a decreased satisfaction in their married life as the home confinement and social isolation led to increased family conflicts and sharing of small spaces with family members for a very long period of time. This was coupled with a complete absence of any form of social support. Thus, this made many Israeli women feel quite vulnerable, helpless and overburdened during the home confinement period. Many women from around the world have been experiencing excessive burden and higher levels of insecurity due to the absence of sufficient social support. Therefore, the pandemic has left many women around the world unequipped to deal with different kinds of stressors that were presented before them. Another study by Erkan et al. (2020), also points out that domestic violence has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic due to the pandemic related stressors as well as due to forced home confinement which in turn brought the victims to close proximity with their abusers. The pandemic made it difficult for the victims to plan out any exit strategies without being abused.

Marital Stress is a phenomenon which has become quite common in the busy lives of working professionals where there are lot of responsibilities to be fulfilled, lots of insecurities which comes with the jobs and extremely less time for personal care. This pattern of lifestyle makes it very difficult for the individual to feel relaxed. The busy lifestyle and the whole range of responsibilities make it so difficult for a balanced work and family life. Therefore, the insecurities in one's life and one's responsibilities mostly take up most of the time in one's lives. This can lead to marital dissatisfaction, miscommunication, boredom in marriage, constant fights etc. Study shows that Domestic Violence against women has been a disturbing public health issue for the society. The current COVID-19 pandemic has increased this extremely painful experience (Kofman & Garfin, 2020). Studies show that previous situations where there were catastrophes, there has been an increase in the Domestic Violence cases being reported. There was a fourfold increase in the rates of gender-based violence (Anastario et al., 2009). Study conducted by Laudisio in the year 1993 also shows that there was an increase in the rate of violence against women in the United States during and after other Hurricanes. Therefore, this clearly points out the vulnerability and insecurity that women experience around the world and also how that escalates during a crisis. In such catastrophes, everything begins to crumble around and there will be a lot of insecurity regarding one's health, safety and finance. Study shows that domestic violence emerge from existing social and systemic issues and they get worse during disaster—related stress and strain, economic downturn, displacement and uncertainty (Enarson, 1999). The COVID-19 pandemic is also a distressing period for everyone. The pandemic has forced everyone to stay indoors thus exposing already vulnerable victims to more risk and if they step out they get exposed to an infectious virus (Kofman & Garfin, 2020). Therefore, the research work conducted during the pandemic has
revealed quite a lot of disturbing data on the well-being and safety concerning women in their own homes. The awareness around marital stress and domestic violence and how it took a turn for the worse during the pandemic can definitely be a good place to start. The pandemic has forced families stay together for a longer time than they would usually prefer. This has increased the stress and strain in marital relationships and has made it easy for abusive partners to abuse the victims due to both social isolation and home confinement. However, the recent importance for these two issues have arisen mainly because the support systems which were offered to people which had helped them cope with these issues had suddenly become almost absent due to social isolation and home confinement. This is what has made us rethink on how to tackle these two issues irrespective of the situation that one is placed in.

The mental health as well as the physical safety of women are a very crucial factor for the efficient functioning of any society. Most of the contributions made by women in households do not fall under the category of paid work but the amount of work a woman does for her family is invaluable as it ensures the smooth functioning of family units and enables everyone else to effectively work in their respective jobs. Therefore, it also becomes the duty of every member of each society to acknowledge and respect the role of women in their lives.

Efficient and timely responses from the authorities across the world as well as from non-profit organizations can save at least some women from extreme danger. The most important aspect is to be aware of the danger looming women who have been tied in abusive and extremely stressful marriages. As research paper proposes the theory that exploring the cultural factors which compel women to stay in abusive marriages should be the beginning point from where women can understand the barriers which have prevented them from standing up for their rights. This can make it easier for them to break away from abusive marriages. Along with understanding the factors which has sustained abusive marriages in societies, proper rehabilitation and skill enhancement programmes should also be effectively implemented as this can help them get back to normal life after being rescued. Figure 1 has diagrammatically represented the way abusive marriages impact a woman’s life and how a victim of domestic violence can be successfully rehabilitated.

Figure 1. Conceptual model.
2. Discussion
The studies have shown how the situational factor which is the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly played a critical role in increasing the stress and strain in marital relationships as well as increasing the chances of domestic violence in abusive households. The studies also point out that the strain of managing the household, children, other family members and work for working women have put women at a higher risk than ever before. The studies conducted might have certain limitations which might arise while understanding the situation. The cultural differences can play a huge role in the way women perceive marital stress and domestic violence. Therefore, an understanding of the cultural factors which can contribute to marital stress and can sanction abusive behavior is very crucial while providing support to women as this would help us understand the factors which have bound women in strained and abusive marriages. This would make it easier to help them come out of such destructive relationship patterns. The main focus of the present research paper is to explore in detail how cultural belief systems have compelled women to stay in abusive marriages and how this plays a very crucial aspect in the therapeutic rehabilitation of women trapped in abusive marriages. Therapy becomes a crucial factor for women when they break away from an abusive marriage as there would be blame, guilt and various other tags which society will impose on the woman. The cultural belief system never punishes the abuser. It is always the abused who get scrutinized everywhere. Therefore, the research paper proposes that psychologists and social support groups should focus on therapeutic rehabilitation which focuses on breaking down the culturally imposed expectations for women trapped in abusive marriages and aim to work on rebuilding a self-reliant and guilt free woman.

Research studies which focus on the importance of self-help groups and support networks in the neighborhood and workplaces can also give a direction on how to tackle these two major social issues. The studies should focus on how the various resources in our society can be used to offer a safe space for women who are at risk from domestic violence. The current research paper is an attempt to understand some of the reasons why marital stress and domestic violence have been quite prevalent in our societies despite everyone being aware of the problems caused by these issues and what can be done from a therapeutic point of view to empower women trapped in abusive marriages. The main proposition that the research paper has put forward is to give importance to the cultural factors which compel women to stay in abusive marriages. Therapeutic guidance and skill enhancement programmes have been suggested in the paper as two effective ways to help women who come out of abusive marriages to rebuild their lives.

Marital Stress and domestic violence also have a lasting impact on children. If a child witnesses a stressful relationship with his parents that would have a lasting impact on his personality as he grows up. Therefore, a support system to help children who experience stressful and violent relationships within their families should also be the focus of every society. The emotional trauma of growing up in families where there is also a lot strain and stress among the family members or where there is an abusive atmosphere is quite traumatic. It can be quite harmful for the emotional well-being of the children. The data form studies show that children who have experienced stressful and violent relationships within their families display a range of negative emotions and they experience difficulty in processing emotions in a healthy manner. They experience higher levels of insecurity (Thornton, 2014).

Therefore, future studies which explores the wide impact of marital stress and domestic violence on various stakeholders can be a very important step in ensuring that there is enough awareness about the impact of these two major issues in our society. Establishing strong support groups which will be operational irrespective of the situation and which can reach out to victims of domestic violence and also offer guidance and support to women in strained and stressful marriages will be another step which can ensure the safety and happiness of women trapped in stressful and abusive marriages.
3. Conclusion
The research paper attempts to understand how marital stress and domestic violence has become a major social issue during the pandemic. The research studies conducted has identified various factors which triggered more stress and abuse in marital relationships across the world. The current research paper has tried to understand the issue and how it has aggravated over time. It has offered an analytical perspective of these two major social issues and the lasting impact it can have on the various stakeholders, most importantly on children who come from abusive and strained households. The paper has also come up with suggestions on how to take forward the discussion and work related to these two major social issues. Few suggestions have also been mentioned. The paper has also identified the limitations observed while reviewing the studies conducted in this area. Understanding the cultural bindings of women trapped in abusive households during the COVID-19 pandemic has not been identified in any of the studies which have been reviewed and this factor plays a very important role in understanding the hesitation shown by many women in moving out of destructive marriages. This can be a key factor which can make it easier for support groups while providing counselling and other kinds of support to women trapped in abusive marriages. This is one of the major factors which have strongly been suggested in the present research paper.

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