

The Devastating Impact of Domestic Violence on Women's Mental Health: In Indian context

Dr. Sadia Habib

Assistant Professor (Senior scale), P.G. Department of Psychology, M.M. Mahila College, Ara. (Bihar)

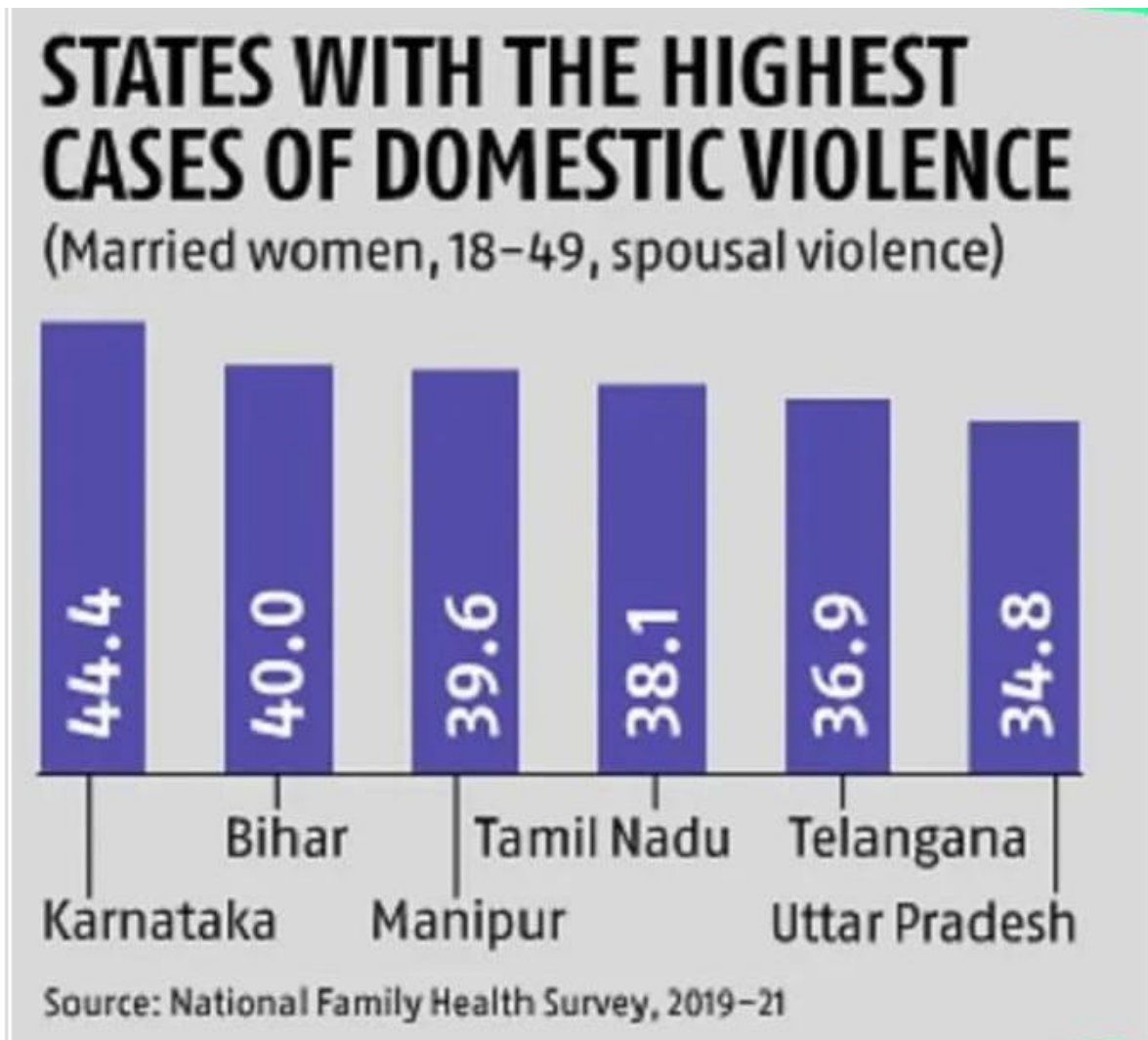
Abstract

Domestic violence is a pervasive issue in India, with far-reaching consequences for women's mental health. This paper examines the devastating impact of domestic violence on women's mental health in India. Including the prevalence of domestic violence, its impact on women's mental health and the factors that contribute to domestic violence. Secondary data from various sources, including academic journals, government reports and non-governmental organization (NGO) publications, were analyzed to examine the relationship between domestic violence and women's mental health in India. The finding suggests that domestic violence is a significant predictor of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse. Women who experienced domestic violence were more likely to develop mental health problems than those who did not experience domestic violence. The paper highlights the need for policy makers, practitioners and researchers to prioritize the mental health needs of women experiencing domestic violence in India. The finding of this paper have important implications for the development of policies and programmes aimed and addressing domestic violence and promoting women's mental health in India.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Mental Health, India, Depression, Predictor.

Domestic violence is a pervasive social issue that affects women worldwide with particularly deep consequences in patriarchal societies like India. The World Health Organization (2013) defines domestic violence as 'Any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm to those in the relationship.' India's socio-cultural landscape is deeply rooted in traditional gender roles that often place women in subordinate positions within the family structure. Therefore, women exhibit distinct patterns of psychological distress and psychiatric disorders as compared to men. According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) of India, nearly 30% women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence and 6% have faced sexual violence. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals that domestic violence cases are among the most reported crime against women with 85,376 cases filed under cruelty by husband or her relatives in 2022. These figures though staggering, may under-estimate the actual prevalence of domestic violence due to the under-reporting caused by fear and stigma. Despite the enactment of the 'Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) in 2005, there are many challenges in implementing this act related to persistent of enforcements and cultural resistance and because of which such environment is created where women have to struggle for their basic needs. The severity of domestic violence can be gauged from the fact that in India, 29.3% of ever married women reporting physical or sexual violence by their spouse (International institute for population Sciences, 2017). The prevalence of domestic violence is influenced by several factors such as

dowry, early marriage, alcohol abuse and cultural norms that condone male dominance. Despite legal protection like the ‘Protection of women from domestic violence act (PWDVA) enacted in 2005. But due to social stigma and ostracism, prevent many women from seeking help. Domestic violence in India takes many forms- physical assault, emotional changes, sexual and even economic deprivation. Women subjected to this abuse often face severe mental health consequences such as manifestation of depression, anxiety, post- traumatic stress (PTSD)disorder and suicidal tendency etc.



The constitution of India gave to women, the fundamental right to equality and the right not to discriminated against on ground of religion, caste and sex. A special provision was included by the constitution in Article 15(3) for permitting the state to positively discriminate in favour of women by enacting laws so as to improve their social economic and political condition.

Definition of Mental Health- Mental health refers to a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own potential, cope with stress, work productively and contribute to their community.

According to W.H.O. (2019) defines mental health as ‘ ‘ A state of well-being in which every individual realizes their own potential can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and able to make a contribution to their community’ ’.

Definition of Domestic Violence – Domestic violence also known intimate partner violence is a pattern

of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. According to American Psychological Association (APA): ‘Domestic violence is a serious threat to mental and physical health and take many forms including physical, emotional and sexual abuse (APA, 2020)’.

Types of Domestic violence- Domestic violence can take many forms, including:

1. **Physical violence-** includes hitting, punching, slapping, kicking, physical confinement, use of weapons, injuries, bruises and broken bones etc.
2. **Emotional/psychological abuse** – It includes Verbal insult, gas lighting, isolation from friends, family or community, threat, intimidation or coercion etc.
3. **Sexual abuse** – it includes forced sexual intercourse or acts, unwanted touching or fondling, sexual exploitation or coercion and rape or attempted rape etc.
4. **Financial abuse-** It includes control over finances, spending or earning, withholding money or resources, exploitation of partner’s financial resources and restricting access to education or employment etc.
5. **Verbal abuse-** it includes name calling, insult or put-downs. Yelling, screaming or threatening, humiliation and degradation etc.
6. **Digital abuse-** it includes following or tracking partner’s movements, monitoring phone call, email or online activities and shoeing -up unexpectedly at work or home.
7. **Spiritual abuse-** it includes using spirituality or faith to control or manipulate, restricting partner’s spiritual practices, using scripture or doctrine to justify abuse and forcing partner to participate in spiritual practices etc.
8. **Cultural abuse-** it includes using cultural differences to control or manipulate, restricting partner’s cultural practices and forcing partner to adopt abuser’s cultural norms.
9. **Elder abuse-** It includes physical, emotional or financial abuse of elderly partner, exploitation of elderly partner’s resources and restricting access to medical care or social services etc.
10. **Disability abuse-** it includes physical, emotional or financial abuse of partner with disability, neglect or abandonment, exploitation of partner’s resources and restricting access to assistive devices or services etc.

It is essential to recognize that domestic violence can take many forms and can affect individuals of all ages, cultures and backgrounds. Women subjected to this abuse often face severe mental health consequences, exacerbated by societal pressure to remain silent.

Causes of Domestic Violence

The causes of domestic violence are complex and vary from person to person. Some of the causes of domestic violence are listed below-

1. One of the main cause is a desire for power and control. Abusers often want to take control over their partner and feel superior.
2. Cultural norms and gender roles can also contribute to domestic violence particularly in male dominated societies.
3. Substance abuse is another element that contribute to violent behaviour since intoxication impairs judgement and increases anger.

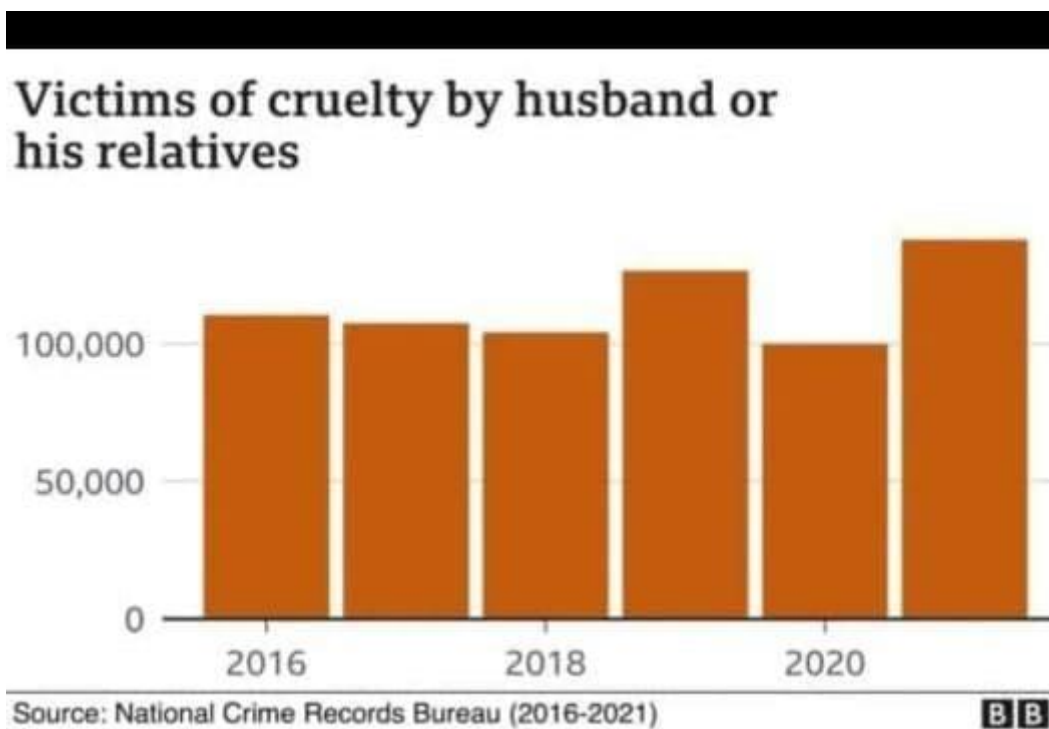
4. Financially difficulty, unemployment and a lack of education are all responsible factors for domestic violence.

Impact of domestic violence on women's' mental health-

1. **Depression and Anxiety:** Domestic violence is a significant predictor of depression and anxiety among women in India. The constant fear and stress from being in an abusive environment create a pervasive sense of helplessness. Numerous studies indicate that domestic violence is strongly linked to elevated levels of depression and anxiety. A study published in the Asian Journal of Psychiatry found that 56% of women who had experienced domestic violence exhibited clinical sign of depression compared to only 15% among non-abused women. Similarly, 46% of abused women were found to suffer from anxiety disorders.
2. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** Prolonged exposure to domestic violence leads to PTSD, a condition characterized by flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety triggered by the trauma. Women, who have experienced extreme forms of violence—such as physical assault, sexual abuse, or threats of murder—are at a heightened risk of developing PTSD. According to a 2020 study by Jindal Global Law School, approximately 35% of Indian women who had faced domestic violence exhibited symptoms of PTSD, with flashbacks, nightmares, and panic attacks being common. This aligns with international research, where PTSD prevalence among survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) is estimated to be as high as 60%. Women who endure physical and sexual violence from their partners are most likely to develop PTSD, resulting in long-term psychological suffering. PTSD not only affects their ability to function in daily life but also creates a cycle of fear, making it difficult for them to leave abusive relationships.
3. **Suicidal Tendencies** -Secondary data from the Lancet Psychiatry Journal (2019) indicates that domestic violence significantly increases the risk of suicide among women in India. The study found that 1 in 5 women who had been abused by their partners reported having attempted suicide, while 48% of women who completed suicide had a history of intimate partner violence. These statistics are supported by the NCRB, which reports that over 20,000 women die by suicide each year, many of them due to domestic abuse. Cultural norms that discourage divorce and make it difficult for women to leave their abusive husbands further push women to see suicide as the only solution to their suffering.
4. **Low Self-Esteem and Identity Loss:** Continuous emotional and verbal abuse often leads to diminished self-esteem and a loss of personal identity. Women subjected to derogatory comments, threats, and isolation from friends and family begin to internalize these negative perceptions, leading to self-doubt and a loss of self-worth. This emotional degradation often manifests in feelings of worthlessness, social withdrawal, and difficulty making decisions—contributing to further mental health decline.
5. **Substance Abuse:** Prolonged abuse often leads to substance abuse as women try to cope with their trauma. A study from The Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine revealed that 30% of women who had experienced domestic violence reported substance abuse, either to numb emotional pain or under the coercion of their abusive partners. In many cases, emotional abuse erodes women's self-esteem, leading to social withdrawal, identity loss, and severe depression.

Review of literature

Domestic violence is a negative aspect of our society and significant violation of human right. It goes without saying that cases of domestic violence is the most frequent form of the crime in India and worldwide. Domestic violence is strongly associated with increased risk of mental illness and can leave a lasting impact on the victim’s mental health. Fear, anxiety, despair and low self-esteem are all common consequences of domestic violence among women. It was found in various studies that prevalence rate of the domestic violence in India nearly 18%-70% (Slep,A.M.et.al.,2005, Heise, L. et.al. 2002). It is a very shocking fact that an offence against women occurs every three minute in India (Scroll, in.2015). This situation worsened further during covid-19. Cases of domestic violence increased by 30% during covid-19 (Pandit. A. 2023). It Was found in a survey conducted by NFHS-5that the percentage of cases of domestic violence varies in every state. Highest number of domestic violence cases were found in Karnataka which was 44% after that Bihar 40%, Manipur 39%, Telangana 36% and Tamilnadu 38%. O’Conner (2017) found on the basis of case report and literature review that physical and emotional abuse by the male partner affects the mental health of women the most. Many researches have shown that there is a direct link between alcoholic partner and domestic violence. Stanesby,et.al. (2018) observed that those women were more likely to suffer from domestic violence who had a close relationship with an alcoholic partner. Sharma,et.al. (2019) performed a cross-sectional study on 827 married women in Delhi and found that the rate of physical, psychological and sexual violence was very high among these married women.one fourth women were mentally unstable. Many types of mental abnormalities are seen in these women such as forgetfulness, sadness and depression, loss of self-confidence and suicidal tendency etc. Gender based violence is a global problem that affect one in every three women.



A study carried out in the year of 2013, it was estimated that 38% of women were murdered by their male partner although the corresponding figure for men is 6% (Dash, 2014). In another study related to domestic violence, it was found that 3% of pregnant women between 18-49 have experienced physical

violence during pregnancy (S, K.,2022). Kumar,et.al. (2005) exhibited strong association between domestic spousal violence and poor mental health. Sample was collected from seven cities of India included 9938 women. Their age range was from 15 to 49 from rural, urban, non-slum and urban slum area. It was found that 40% reported poor mental health due to physical violence such as ‘slap’, ‘hit’, ‘kick’ or beat. Those women who faced punishment during childhood, have alcoholic husband or witnessed father beating their mother were at a high risk of disturbed mental health. Domestic spousal violence is more common in low household income, illiteracy and non-working women (Babu, B.V., Kar, S.K.,2009).

Objective

To analyze and examine the relationship between domestic violence and women’s mental health in India.

Methodology

This paper will analyze secondary data from various sources, including academic journals, government reports and non- governmental organization (NGO) publication.

Result

The finding of this paper suggest that domestic violence is a significant predictor of mental health problems in India. Women who experienced domestic violence were more likely to develop depression, anxiety, PTSD and substance abuse than those who did not experience domestic violence.

Case Studies-1-Case studies, such as the one by Jagori, an NGO in Delhi, highlight the mental health impact of domestic violence. In one case, a woman who had suffered physical and emotional abuse for more than a decade was diagnosed with chronic depression and anxiety. Despite reaching out for help, her economic dependence and fear of losing custody of her children prevented her from leaving the abusive environment. According to Jagori’s 2018 report, women in similar situations are often left without any significant psychological support, worsening their mental health.

Case Studies-2- Several case studies highlight the interrelation between domestic violence and mental health. In one instance from Uttar Pradesh, a woman who had been subjected to daily physical abuse for over 10 years was diagnosed with severe depression and PTSD. Despite reporting the abuse to local authorities’ multiple times, little action was taken, and her mental health deteriorated until she required hospitalization. Her case reflects the broader systemic failures that allow domestic violence to continue unchecked, with devastating mental health consequences.

Discussion

Lack of Mental Health Resources and mental health infrastructure are the biggest challenges in India. With less than one psychiatrist per 100,000 people, mental health services are woefully inadequate, especially in rural areas where domestic violence rates are higher. According to the world Bank (2022), India spends only 1.3% of its GDP on health care. There are just 0.75 Psychiatrists per 100,000 people making access to mental health services incredibly difficult for victim of domestic violence.

The mental health, effects of domestic violence are compounded by India's socio-cultural context. The stigma attached to discussing mental health, coupled with traditional notions of family honor, prevents many women from seeking psychiatric help. In rural areas, the situation is even worse due to the lack of

mental health services and healthcare professionals. Women who attempt to leave abusive relationships face ostracism, financial dependence, and the threat of losing custody of their children. The normalization of violence in some communities, combined with the pressure to uphold family honor, often leads to a cycle of silence and denial. Even when women muster the courage to report abuse, law enforcement agencies and the legal system often fail to provide adequate support, leading to further mental trauma. In rural areas, the situation is even worse. Data from the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) suggests that women in these areas are more likely to accept domestic violence as a 'normal' part of life. The NSSO survey (2019) reported that 70% of rural Indian women believed that family issues, including domestic violence, should not be shared outside the home, which significantly hampers efforts to address the mental health consequences of abuse.

Recommendations

1. Investment in mental health services must be a priority, particularly in regions with high rates of domestic violence. This includes training healthcare providers to recognize the signs of abuse and providing women with easy access to counseling services.
2. Many women refuse to seek help due to the fear of social stigma and the belief that domestic issues should remain private. Public awareness campaigns are needed to destigmatize mental health and encourage women to seek help without fear of shame. Social norms that support gender inequality must be addressed and changed.
3. Educational programs targeting both men and women about the mental health consequences of domestic violence could shift cultural attitudes.
4. The judicial system also takes an active role in protecting victims and charging abusers. Although the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act exists, enforcement is often weak, and the legal process can be intimidating for survivors. Strengthening legal institutions to respond more effectively to domestic violence cases and providing free legal support to women could alleviate some of the stress and anxiety associated with seeking justice.
5. Laws against domestic violence as well as stronger legal framework and support services such as shelters, counselling and hotlines are critical in helping victims to leave abusive situations.
6. Police officers, lawyers, and judges should receive specialized training to handle domestic violence cases sensitively.

Conclusion

Domestic violence remains a significant public health and human rights issue in India, with profound consequences for women's mental health. Depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal tendencies are common among women exposed to prolonged violence. Addressing the mental health effects of domestic violence requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving mental health services, legal support, and public education. Without addressing these issues, the mental health crisis among women in India will continue to escalate, perpetuating cycles of abuse and suffering. By breaking the silence surrounding both domestic violence and mental health, India can move toward a future where women are free from abuse and empowered to live with dignity. To fight domestic violence, it is crucial to raise awareness, challenge damaging societal norms and guarantee that legal protections are put into effect and enforced. By cultivating a culture of support, respect and equality, we may move towards a society in which no one is afraid a society in which no one is afraid of violence in their home.

References

1. American Psychological association, (2020).
2. Asian Journal of Psychiatry (2018).
3. Babu, BV., Kar ,SK.,(2009): Domestic violence against women in eastern India: a population-based study on prevalence and related issues. *BMC Public Health*, 9:129. [PMC free article] [PubMed][Google Scholar] [Ref list]
4. Dash, D. K. (2014, December 12). 38% of women killed are by partners: WHO, *The Times of India*.<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/38-of-women-killed-are-by-partners-who/articleshow/45486879.cms>
5. Heise L, Ellsberg M, Gottmoeller, MA.,(2002): global overview of gender – based violence. *Int. J. Gynaecol.Obstet* :78 suppl. 1:55-14.
6. International Institute for Population Sciences (2017).
7. Jagori NGO Report, 2018.
8. Jindal Global Law School,2020.
9. Kumar, S., Jeyaseelan, L., Suresh, S., & Ahuja, R. C. (2005). Domestic violence and its mental health correlates in Indian women. *British Journal of Psychiatry*,187(1), 62–67. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.187.1.62>
10. *Lancet Psychiatry Journal* ,2019
11. *Mental Health Foundation* (2020), what is mental Health
12. *National Crime Record Bureau* (NCRB), 2022.
13. *National Family Health Survey* (NFHS-5), India
14. Pandit, A. (2023, January 8). Over 6,900 domestic violence plants were filed by women in 2022.. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/over6900-domestic-violence-plaints-filed-by-women-in2022/articleshow/96839600.cms>
15. Slep AM, O’Leary SG. Parent and partner violence in families with young children: Rates, Patterns and connections. *J. consult clin. Psychol.* 2005; 73:435-44.
16. Scroll. in. (2015, September 5). Crimes against women are reported every two minutes in India. <https://scroll.in/article/753496/crimes-against-women-reported-every-two-minutes-in-india>.
17. Stanesby, O., Callinan, S., Graham, K., Wilson, I.M., Greenfield, T.K., Wilsnack, S. Hettige, S., Hanh, H.T.M., Siengsounthone, L., Waleewong, O. and Laslett, A.-M. (2018) Harm from Known Others' Drinking by Relationship Proximity to the Harmful Drinker and Gender: A Misanalysis across 10 Countries. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 42 (9), 1693-1703.
18. Sharma, K., Vatsa, M., Kalaivani, M., & Bhardwaj, D. (2019). Mental health effects of domestic violence against women in Delhi: A community-based study. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*,8(7),2522.https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpe.jfmpe_427_19
19. S, K. (2022, May 27). Latest NFHS-5 Data Shows 30% of Indian Women Face Domestic Violence ... And That’s Just the Reported Number! Women's Web: For Women Who Do. <https://www.womensweb.in/2022/05/nfhs-5-domestic-violence-latest-figures-show-not-much-haschanged-may22wk4sr/>
20. United Nations (2020): Ending violence against women.

21. World Health Organization (2013): Global and Regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and Health effects of intimate partner violence and non- partner sexual violence. Geneva: W.H.O.
22. World Health Organization (2019), Mental Health