

Steep Rise in Domestic Violence Cases as Pandemic Changes Home Dynamics

Confined life and increasing stress have led to 2x growth in such cases in past 3-6 months: Experts

Rica.Bhattacharyya@timesgroup.com

Mumbai: A woman working in the IT sector in one of the metros recently relocated with her husband to his village home, after both their companies allowed work from anywhere due to Covid-19. However, she felt out of place in the new setup, though her husband was happy to be back with his parents. She wanted to move back to the city but her husband opposed the idea.

"The initial differences started blowing up out of control, and the husband and his family soon started verbally and physically abusing the lady," said Amber Alam, director for employee assistance programmes and wellness services, Asia Pacific, Optum, which helps companies provide healthcare services to employees. In the 16 years of the Optum's operations in India, Alam said,

domestic violence cases have been at their highest in the last few months since the pandemic began.

A confined life, prolonged work from home and rising stress levels due to the pandemic have led to a steep rise in domestic violence in recent times, said mental health experts.

"People are seeing different dynamics with the family life in the post-pandemic world," said Alam. "While in some cases it is becoming difficult for one partner to adjust to a totally different city or setup, in other cases, the space crunch in large metros is leading to more fru-

stration and more frequent blow-ups."

In Chennai, a professional reached out to counselling and wellness services firm Itohelp.net. She was in a live-in relationship and being frequently assaulted by her boyfriend, who locked her up in the house.

Such cases are on the rise across white- and blue-collar segments, said Archana Bisht, director, Itohelp.net. While the vast majority of domestic violence is directed at women, men too have been subjected to physical abuse, she said.

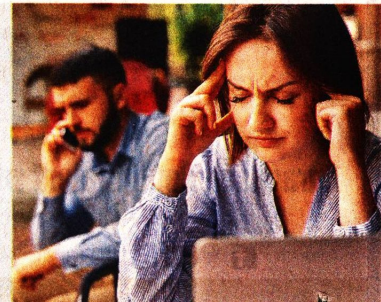
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Pressure Situation

Cases of physical abuse reported in white- and blue-collar segments

Mental health experts attribute rise in cases of abusive relationships to:

- Confined life, prolonged work from home
- Rising stress levels and frustration
- Anger management issues
- Unequal power equation at home
- Alcoholism



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“We are even hearing a few cases these days where the woman is physically abusive. In such cases, men find it difficult and uncomfortable to talk about it,” said Bisht.

Several top companies have come to recognise the issue and some have hired mental health professionals to deal with it.

Hindustan Unilever, the country’s largest fast-moving consumer goods maker, has launched a policy that seeks to protect and grant relief to employees who face physical and emotional abuse beyond the workplace, such as in their homes or other public places, including online media.

“The support provided under this policy will be in the form of psychological counselling, along with financial and medical help to such employees,” said a company

spokesperson. The policy is gender neutral and applicable to all HUL employees. The support will cover access to urgent medical care and psychological counselling, paid leave of up to 10 calendar days and reimbursement of lodging and boarding expenses for 15 calendar days for the employee only, till the person arranges for separate accommodation, as needed.

Other leading companies such as Tata Steel have increased communication with employees and their family members in recent times as the pandemic has led to increased stress levels.

“We provide mental health support in the form of counselling and more frequent communication with employees and even their family members,” said Suresh Tripathi, vice-president, HR, Tata Steel. “However, we do not have anything specific for domestic abuse.”

Lawyers said there is an increase in the number of divorce cases due to the rise in frustration levels caused by the husband and wife being confined 24x7 for nine months or so. InnerHour, which provides counselling services, has seen a fourfold increase in couple therapy bookings. “We are seeing more people coming to us with serious relationship discord than ever before. This also leads to increased chances of domestic abuse,” said Amit Malik, founder and chief executive, InnerHour.