A Social Psychological Exploration of Manhood threat and Domestic Violence in India During the Covid -19 pandemic

Research question: What is the role of fragile masculinity in explaining the rising rates of physical domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic in India?

Introduction:

During the Covid -19 pandemic, an increase in domestic violence, specifically against women in the form of Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been noticed. Though constant lockdowns did positively contribute to controlling the rapid spread of this infection, the quarantines came with multiple societal cons, the main one being Domestic Violence *(COVID-19 and Domestic Violence against Women, 2020).* In India, this aspect of strictly imposed lockdown has not been explored in sufficient detail. Under the binary gender system followed by India (and many other countries), gender norms and roles play a key role in determining how people function in society. More recently the idea of a Fragile Gender Identity or Fragile Masculinity has been proposed where the extrinsic pressures that men face to conform to rigid gender norms may cause them to be more likely to affirm their masculinity when it is threatened such as through physical aggression. One example of this kind of masculinity threat might be the economic threat brought by Covid-19 in terms of Indian men's inability to provide for their families. As such, when Indian men with fragile masculinities feel this type of masculinity threat, they may act aggressively toward their wives as a way of reasserting their masculinity. Covid- 19 presents a number of potential threats to manhood socially, economically and ethically, that promote fragile masculinity. This theory attempts to explain the increasing rates of domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic in India through the development of fragile masculine identities brought on by economic insecurity within the traditional Indian family structure.

Domestic Violence/IPV (husband to wife): Its role as a threat response for men with fragile masculine identities-

At the very beginning of lockdowns 69 of the 257 reports made to the National Commision for Women in regards to offence against women were pertaining to Domestic Violence. In Delhi, the capital of India, 2,500 calls have been made to emergency helplines out of which an alarming number of 1612 reports were regarding domestic violence *(Examining the Impact of Lockdown (Due to COVID-19) on Domestic Violence (DV): An Evidences from India, 2020)*. This clearly highlights the alarming rate at which domestic violence and IPV cases have risen during the epidemic.

In Indian society- and many other societies across the world- boys and men are expected to conform to strict gender norms and roles that constitute patriarchal society's view of manhood. When young boys or men are extrinsically motivated to conform to these norms- rather than intrinsically motivated - they rely on others' evaluations of them to form their own impressions about their manhood. This pressure to conform to abounding roles of masculinity, such as being the leader of one's family, may cause the development of fragile male identities. I consider this masculinity to be fragile as unlike secure identities (intrinsically motivated), when their manhood is challenged or questioned a norm reaffirming threat response is evoked. Many times this threat response is evoked in the form of physical aggression to reassert one's manhood *(Stanaland, 2021)*. A hypothetical example that we can note in terms of manhood threat and domestic violence is when a man with an inflated sense of self *(R. B. Baumeister et al., 2000)*, specifically with regards to employment and being the earning member of their family, notices that his wife submitted an application for a higher paying job. This would question his ability to provide for his family as the 'man' of the house, and

this threat to his masculinity could potentially lead to domestic violence or IPV as a norm reaffirming response and as a release of repressed negative emotions.

Manhood as compared to womanhood is culturally viewed to be in a precarious state as it needs to be defended, oftentimes using aggression or physical violence. The theory of precarious manhood suggests that masculinity must be depicted through acts of toughness and the assertion of dominance *(Bosson et al., 2008)*. This 'manhood' can be lost by the simple act of showing even the most minimal amounts of weakness which is why it needs to be constantly proved. The sense of masculinity gained is once again one that is fragile. Its nature being elusive in the sense of obtainment, it is more than just a physical and biological transition, gaining one's manhood is a status that is earned through a social pathway, because this 'status' can be lost easily through minor social transgressions, its nature is tenuous as well. This precariousness of manhood stems from 'evolved adaptations' in a social setting and social roles abounding competitiveness, defensiveness and public proof of success often involve men who strive to attain this status in society.

Physical aggression and violence is carefully woven into the cultural script for a man but not a woman, which makes IPV and specifically husband to wife domestic violence a huge societal issue. Physical aggression is inclusive of several strategies that help prove a man's manhood, such as risk taking, performing a task that is of a certain difficulty and is visible to all which is why it is the biggest consequence to the motivated nature possessed by men who wish to consistently prove their masculinity. By summarising studies and experiments conducted in the area of physical aggression performed by men, we can note that men usually demonstrate readiness for physical aggression, after performing 'feminine' tasks men prefer to select an aggressive activity (eg. throwing punches) because they possibly felt that their masculinity was being sacrificed by performing those tasks *(R. F.*

Baumeister et al., 1996). Even in the case that physical aggression is not the only 'masculine' alternative, a majority of men tend to select it. Though these acts of violence may not be a default response for many men, their choice to display aggression increases when they believe that they need to reestablish their manhood.

Summarising, explained by both the theories of fragile masculinity and precarious manhood, men with fragile male identities tend to feel anxious when they are put in a position wherein their masculinity is challenged (usually in terms of social norms and gender roles), questioned or threatened. To relieve this sense of anxiety and reassure their manhood they resort to aggressive actions such as physical violence, domestic violence and IPV as norm reaffirming responses.
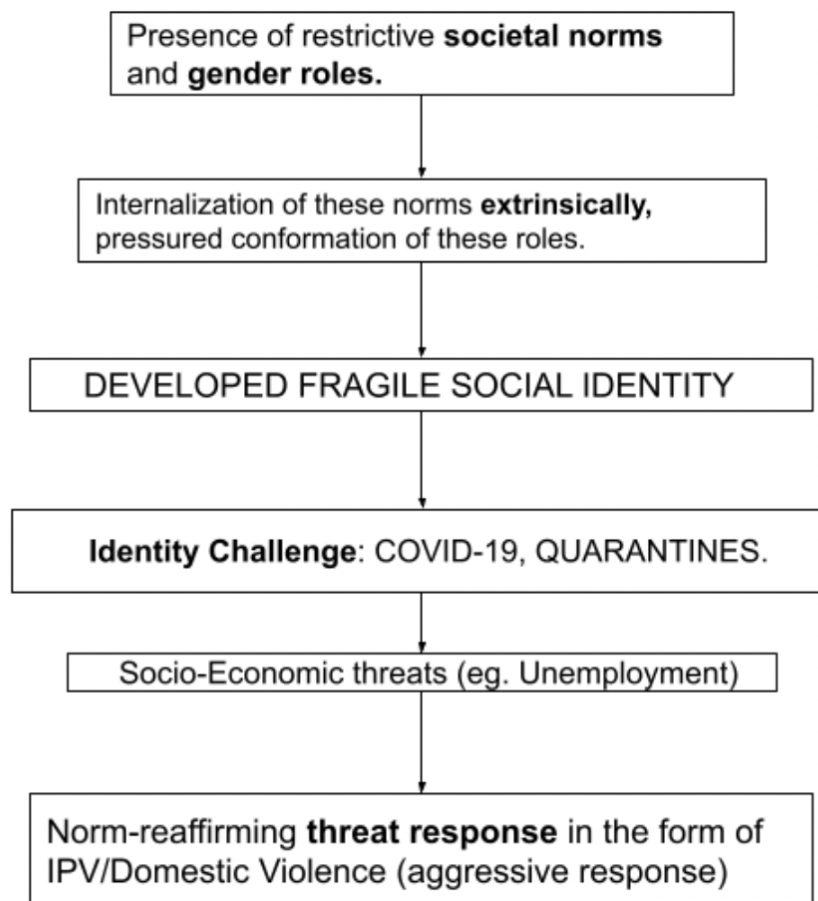
Covid 19 and the Pandemic: Its role as a threat to fragile identities-

Covid - 19 is a universal set that as a whole acts as an identity challenge for men with Fragile masculinity.

Global pandemics are uncommon, which is why they are times of uncertainty for people. If we trace back to the previous epidemics we have seen in our history, we can begin to connect and uncover the relationship between pandemics and the rise in IPV and domestic violence. For example, looking back at the Ebola Pandemic and outbreak specifically in West Africa. During this period of time violence against women increased significantly but was documented as 'collateral damage'. We've seen multiple (at least over 10) disease outbreaks in the last 85 years from Cholera in 1824, to Marburg in 1967 and Ebola in 1976 respectively *(Amber Peterman et al., 2020).* Each one of these epidemics have seen their own share of under-reported cases of domestic violence and IPV, mainly

because these equally important problems were overshadowed by the spread of these infectious diseases. Overall the cases of domestic violence and crimes against women during Covid -19 have increased from 4,709 to 5,695 from March to December and during the quarantine from March to May 1,477 complaints against domestic violence alone were made excluding unreported cases *(Singaravelu, 2020)*. This number is the highest received in this 68 day period, in the last 10 years.

Figure 1 - *This flowchart depicts the roles of Covid -19, its impacts as well as Domestic Violence and IPV in terms of fragile masculinity (Stanaland, 2021). Covid -19 (socio-economic impacts) takes the role of the identity challenge, while Domestic Violence/ IPV take the place of the triggered threat response (aggressive)*

Presence of restrictive **societal norms** and **gender roles.**

Internalization of these norms **extrinsically,** pressured conformation of these roles.

DEVELOPED FRAGILE SOCIAL IDENTITY

Identity Challenge: COVID-19, QUARANTINES.

Socio-Economic threats (eg. Unemployment)

Norm-reaffirming **threat response** in the form of IPV/Domestic Violence (aggressive response)

This epidemic and its quarantines have introduced a whole new spectrum of social and economic threats that pose challenges to masculinity.

During the Covid -19 pandemic, economic crisis has been common in multiple forms, the main one being job loss *(Kalaylıoğlu et al., 2020)*. Overall statistics show that 114 million people lost their jobs, 3.7 trillion dollars were lost in labour income, and even today working hours in 2021 have not returned to the same levels as pre covid times. In India specifically 12.2 crore people lost their jobs *(Desk, 2020)*, out of which 75% of the people were small traders and wage labourers mainly in the sectors of: Food service, Travel, Retail, Recreation, Wellness and Real estate. A large part of social norms for men surround financial stability. This expectation of being the provider of a family that is put on a man makes having a high paying, secure job an important requirement for a man striving to fit into these gender roles. This pressure for economic growth and success caused unemployment during the epidemic to become a challenge to men with fragile masculinity causing them (as depicted in the figure) to respond to this triggered anxiety with physical aggression against those closest to them, their wives (domestic violence and IPV were used as norm reaffirming threat responses). In the United States of America, though each state does have a larger employed percentage as well as a larger number of men in workforces, overall almost half the U.S. labour force (46.8%) now comprises women. This balance in the workforce helps make sure that men aren't pressured to be the single providing members of their families and in society in general, allowing them to deal with job loss in a healthier fashion *(Horowitz et al., 2020)*. Whereas in India women only comprise 19.9% of the total labour force. In India men are considered to be the only earning members of a family *(Sophie Falsini, 2021)*. They are the only educated and working members of several families, and adopting this role of being the provider of the family constitutes a large part of an Indian man's manhood. Thus this job loss during the pandemic is a large manhood threat for them. Lockdowns

have forced people to stay home in the fear of the Coronavirus, this change of dynamics and presence of both husband and wife in a household for long periods of time are bound to cause friction. American culture can be individualistic and the functioning of families has evolved and become more modern with time *(Lumen Learning, n.d.)*, wherein both men and women take part in household activities such as chores and both men and women provide for their families (in an economic sense). Throughout Indian history, households are managed by the woman of the family, usually a wife and mother. The handling of the kitchen and daily activities such as cleaning, shopping for groceries, taking care of children are all conducted by women. These unprecedented times have led to lockdowns, wherein the men work from home or are in a position of job loss (as discussed above). The constant presence of the man at home could lead to several more tasks being handed to a woman, and her inability to complete these activities could lead to domestic violence as well. The woman of an Indian household is usually financially dependent on her husband causing a fear of retaliation *(Gender Roles in India, n.d.)*. In some cases even the simple questioning of the man's work life or the request for him to assist and be of help in household chores can be viewed as an insult or threat to his manhood.

Summarising, due to the restrictions on multiple activities that have been imposed due to the virus, the outlets for men to relieve their masculinity related anxiety have become fewer in number. They no longer can channel the activated cognitions related to aggression through activities such as playing aggressive sports, multiple sexual conquests, picking fights, excessive alcohol consumption, reckless driving and more. These conditions force these feelings of anxiety and aggression related cognitions to be released through forms of violence which are available in these times, thus seeing the upward rise in IPV and domestic violence.

Highlighting the Cultural Differences between the United States of America and India-

Since this paper is essentially using data and ideas from the U.S. to talk about India, this section will aim to highlight the significant cultural differences and similarities between the U.S. and India (in terms of fragile masculinity and gender roles) that could potentially affect manhood threats and cause variations in threat responses triggered within the men of different countries and cultures.

(a) **Gender systems as a whole (Binary and Non Binary)**

The traditional gender system is binary, meaning that it is divided into two main sections. In the case of the gender system the two 'traditional' sections are the genders male and female. People who identify outside of these two genders do not conform to the binary system of gender, thus they identify under the wide spectrum of non-binary individuals *(Thekla Morgenroth, 2020)*.

The United States of America has started accepting non- binary ID'S and providing several more gender options for selection on official documents etc. For example in 2017, California passed a legislation that implemented the marking of a third gender on birth certificates, driving licenses and more. Maine, Minnesota, Washington and New York have also started offering 'X' options on birth certificates and drivers licenses *(Staff, 2019)*. With this legal recognition came significant amounts of social acceptance and safety as well. This slow but sure acceptance leads to more people feeling free to explore genders and more people educating themselves about existing genders. This exploration and education works against traditional gender norms thus loosening the ropes by which people are tied to their gender roles.

Whereas in India the acceptance of even a third gender didn't come easily. Today India only recognizes three genders, male, female and *Hijra. Hijras* or intersex/ transgender people, even in the 21st century are not accepted into Indian society *(Hylton et al., 2018)*. In Indian society adopting this gender is looked down upon and is considered to be something that one should be ashamed of. The hindi slang word *'chakka'* meaning transgendered individual is used as an insult. This kind of

oppression and discrimination faced by people exploring their gender out of the binary system put several indian individuals in a position of pressure to conform to social norms and extrinsic confirmation leads to the development of fragile social identities. Especially considering that gender roles in India give men a higher position in society, several people and families live in the fear that their loved ones or themselves may not be able to live up to the expectations set for them by society.

(b) Significant cultural differences and differing gender norms that may cause different threat responses

Dowry payments are a manifestation of the patriarchal structure of Indian society and though in urban areas it has become less prominent its prevalence is still noticed in rural areas and more traditional families. Dowry however is not practiced in the U.S. striking another difference between the two countries. Dowry is required to be paid by a groom for his bride. This in itself is an act that objectifies women by putting a specific 'price' on them. The inability of an Indian man to pay this pierce for his son's wedding could potentially cause a large financial insecurity, and may be considered a question to his manhood. The objectification of the bride, from rituals such as dowry payments further enunciate the power distribution between husband and wife in an Indian marriage, once again putting the man of the relationship on a social pedestal *(Kishwar, 2005).*

Divorce is also a topic that is viewed in a different light in India as compared to the U.S. Americans have become more accepting of divorce, forming more unorthodox families. Despite having a high divorce rate (53%) the United states maintains a marriage-happy society and carries out healthy divorces *(Theresa Gawlas Medoff, 2000).* Whereas in India, divorce is a taboo topic and is looked down upon in society. Families carry the shame of having divorced members in their families and this causes a lot of resentment for those two individuals to build up in the family. This orthodox nature

of Indian society, causes partners to remain in a marriage even when it is not healthy, unhealthy marriages constitute IPV.

Arranged marriages, especially when children are forced to wed (child marriage, though illegal is still prominent in rural areas of India) can lead to severe physical, sexual or emotional abuse as well. These marriages are extremely common in India, 90% of married individuals in India were wed through arranged marriages with the man usually being 4.5 years older than the woman. Arranged marriage in the U.S. is barely seen and is not a part of American culture. Only 4% of marriages in the U.S are arranged.

Another significant difference between these two countries are the foundations of their culture itself. Understanding the 'fractal pattern' of culture and the conflicts caused by the varying tight-loose nature of culture is important *(Gelfand, 2011)*. Tight cultures are those wherein social norms and roles are well defined and strictly imposed leaving very little room for individual expression. Loose cultures are essentially the opposite, social norms in these cultures are loose and flexible, wherein although expectations are provided they do not define functionality and behaviour. We can say that American culture is a fairly loose culture with a tightness score of 5.1 whereas Indian culture is a tight culture with a tightness score of 11.0 *(Michele J. Gelfand et al., 2011)*. The tightness of Indian culture, society and its norms further drive the development of extrinsically motivated fragile social identities. We can take a simple example of this as well. An Indian man would lack the skills of competence required to develop trust in a partner only because it was not a requirement of Indian social norms that depended on family, reputation and connections to develop these bonds. Whereas an American man would manage to build trust even in a one on one situation because of their relatively looser social norms and culture.

These concepts also directly affect gender roles and norms in both countries (to do with marital complications, financial stability, familial and societal respect).

(c) The transcultural applicability of the definition of (husband to wife) domestic violence

Violence against women, over time has become an essential 'tradition' of the gender system and endoresemnt of these rigid cultures, roles and norms lead to the normalization of physical aggression and violent practices (against women) in daily life *(BERİL TÜRKOĞLU, 2013)*. In India, domestic violence is very commonly viewed as a method of reiterating discipline and core values and principles in one's family. The line between abuse and punishment/ consequence is blurred. Domestic violence numbers increasing aren't the only disadvantage to IPV being viewed as discipline, several studies conducted have shown that mothers who have experienced domestic violence (husband to wife) were more likely to believe in corporal punishment as a means of raising children. Discipline in itself is viewed and understood differently in American culture. The patriarchal gender system in comparison to India, is rarely actively found in American society, meaning that men aren't given the unjust privilege and apparent 'right' to control the women around them, especially those that they have martial or familial relationships with.

Addressing and Preventing:

Making a few recommendations regarding the development of fragile male identities and the impact that they have in the realm of domestic violence.

- How we socialize men/boys (to prevent threat response)

As children enter a learning environment such as schools, they are immediately stereotyped, boys as more strong, analytical and logical, the gender that excels in math and sports. These stereotypes and gender norms are tied to us from a young age and play a large role in our daily lives. Therefore education can help in the socialization of men and boys. The phrase 'boys will be boys' has often

been used as a means of justifying aggressive behaviour projected by men and boys. The cultural script for men is written in a way that aggression is a congruent concept, but this script needs to be re-written with a new set of expectations *(Gender Socialization: Differences between Male and Female Youth in India and Associations with Mental Health, n.d.).* Gender socialization occurs through four main outlets, family, education, peers and media. Each of these respectively reiterate 'sexist' norms, roles and gender stereotypes in a positive light. From simple activities and tasks such as choosing a toy to play with, a favourite color, an outfit to wear, girls and boys have been socialized differently, therefore segregating tasks into two groups 'feminine' activities and 'masculine' activities. This builds the foundation on which fragile male identities develop. Beginning with shutting down the idea of an 'ideal' man, allowing boys to explore their gender and their passions in a healthy, nurturing environment is the first step that can be taken in terms of the prevention of threat responses such as violence *(Gender Stereotypes: Issues That Concern Men and Women from Gender Role Expectations – TalkItOver, Monisha Srichand).*

- Government programs to financially aid families and businesses (to prevent threats)

During the Covid-19 pandemic there have been many economic issues that have arisen the largest one being unemployment and job loss. Since a large part of proving one's manhood is being financially stable and being the provider for the family (in an economic sense), this mass unemployment leads to massive threats to manhood directly contributing to the rise in domestic violence during the epidemic. Introducing government programs and financial aid that can help get people back on their feet in terms of providing them with jobs, helping stabilize economies and allowing businesses to re-establish themselves will put them in a safer, more comfortable position not financially but in terms of preserving their masculine identity as well. We can take the example of the country of Iran. The government here made significant changes to economical proceedings

and provided packages, ways in which people could gain from the immense losses made. On the 15th of April they sold their residual shares in 18 companies in order to generate income as an attempt to deal with the economic consequences of COVID-19 (*Policy Responses to COVID19*, n.d.).

- A cultural shift the way that power is distributed in society where it is acceptable that women have more power (less pressure on men, thus preventing a threat)

As discussed above, the power dynamic noticed between men and women today is one that is not just and is one that puts large amounts of pressure on a man to perform certain duties such as providing financially for his family *(Maitland, n.d.)*. A cultural shift that would divide this higher power in society given to men equally between men and women would not only result in more opportunity for women to explore their passions and gain important things such as financial stability and a career apart from being a homemaker for themselves but also take immense pressure off the backs of men, allowing them to explore their gender and their lives without having to be tied down to the manhood that they constantly have to prove. In not having to prove this manhood, there is prevention of threats to one's masculinity thus reducing physical aggression and domestic violence in terms of fragile masculinity (as a threat response) *(Horowitz et al., 2020)*.

Conclusion-

The extrinsic development of fragile masculine identities due to strict, tight social norms and roles, under the presence of Covid-19 as a manhood threat has contributed to the increase in the number of Domestic Violence and IPV cases during quarantine/lockdowns. The theories of Fragile Masculinity and Precarious Manhood help us understand the development of these identities as well as physical aggression in the form of a threat response when masculinity is challenged, questioned or threatened. Covid-19 in itself has posed multiple social and economic threats to an individual with a

fragile male identity (examples include, financial stability, unemployment, household roles, the power dynamics between husband and wife). These conditions force cognitions related to anxiety and aggression which are channeled in the form of IPV and domestic violence (husband to wife). America and India come with their own societies and cultures that subject the people of both countries to different sets of social norms and roles to abide by. These significant cultural differences such as the foundations of both cultures (American culture is Loose whereas Indian culture is Tight), dowry, divorce, marriage and the gender systems need to be understood and taken into consideration while analysing domestic violence and fragile masculinity. In order to prevent the development of these fragile social identities, further research can be done outlining the socialization of individuals from a young age, campaigns and government programs can help reduce economical threats to manhood (specifically during Covid times) and a cultural shift in power dynamics between man and woman (in a relationship and in society in general) needs to be seen.

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