



# Gujarat National Law University

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**Gujarat National Law University (GNLU) hosted a Digital Dialogue titled, "Addressing Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Post COVID World" on January 07, 2021**

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**Gandhinagar, January 07, 2021:** Gujarat National Law University (GNLU) hosted a Digital Dialogue titled, "Addressing Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Post COVID World" on January 07, 2021.

The webinar was graced by Smt. Rekha Sharma (Chairperson, National Commission for Women) as a keynote speaker. Other panellists were:

1. Dr Bharti Sharma (Shakti Shalini),
2. Ms Reena Tete (Independent Consultant, Women and Child Rights), and
3. Mr Jocelyn Brousseau (Project coordinator, Doctors Without Borders)
4. Dr Yashoda Kora (a medical practitioner associated with Doctors without Borders), and
5. Ms Catherine (Counsellor with Doctors without Borders)

In her keynote address, NCW Chairperson Smt Rekha Sharma said that when the world was fighting the pandemic, women across the globe were fighting a double battle: one with the Covid pandemic and the other with domestic violence and gender-based violence. The number of complaints of domestic violence, sexual violence and online sexual harassment had gone up, not only in India but across the globe. Realizing the gravity of the situation, NCW set up a round-the-clock online helpline as moving out was not possible for the victims. Online complaints increased from 200-300 a week to 1500 a week. NCW also set up a HAPPY-TO-HELP taskforce to help elderly, particularly lone women, in sourcing groceries and other essentials.

Smt Rekha Sharma made an interesting observation that while the number of complaints on the NCW helpline was increasing during the lockdown, the number of complaints with police authorities were decreasing. She attributed this to the apathy on the part of the police. During the lockdown, the police were overworked and helping the victims of domestic violence was not a priority for the police, then. She cited the example of how a bleeding victim of domestic violence who approached the police station for help was turned away as she was not wearing a mask! She said that NCW is working with relevant authorities for developing an SOP as to how police personnel should deal with the victims of gender-based violence.

Smt. Sharma said that following the work-from-home culture induced by the lockdown, the instances of online harassment have increased significantly in the absence of ethics of online behaviour.



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Smt. Sharma concluded her address by saying that while the systems are in place for helping the victims, there are deficiencies. She thought that rather than introducing new systems, the existing systems should be revamped to make them effective.

Dr Bharti Sharma of Shakti Shalini gave an overview of the work of Shakti Shalini. She said Shakti Shalini was founded by two mothers whose daughters were burnt alive for dowry. She said following the lockdown, Shakti Shalini converted its helpline from day-time helpline to 24x7 helpline and adopted an open-door policy for their shelter homes. While we take necessary precautions to avoid the spread of Covid-19 in the shelter homes, we don't say no to any victim so long there is a place available.

Commenting on the problems faced in their work, Dr Sharma said that we are not classified as an essential service provider. As a result, our volunteers and counsellors face difficulties in reaching out to the victims for their help. It is pathetic that we had to struggle hard to secure passes.

She said that police help is a must for carrying out a rescue operation in case of domestic violence. However, during the pandemic, the police were quite busy with other duties. Besides, there is a need for a change in the mindset of police. The police generally ask the victims to go their husbands' houses or the parents' houses stating that they are the safest places for them while the fact is that they are subjected to violence in those very homes! We have the instances wherein the victims of domestic violence were unmarried girls!

Dr Sharma said that the victim women are not comfortable with online counselling. Further, they could not approach courts for relief as the courts were closed down. Besides, the huge delays in ongoing litigation owing to the lockdown traumatized the victims.

Mr Jocelyn Brousseau of Doctors Without Borders said that they are operating dispensaries in the areas where people, mostly internal migrants, with lower income and without job security stay. Their problems were aggravated by the pandemic-induced lockdown.

Ms Catherine, a counsellor with Doctors without Borders said that the victims of domestic violence faced a two-fold problem during the lockdown: one was that of the accessibility to technology. Then, even when the victim obtained access to a mobile phone, she was not able to communicate her problem because of the proximity to the perpetrators of violence/abuse.

Ms Reena Tete said that, on the policy front, the biggest problem was non-availability of disaggregated data. Even today, disaggregated data of the victims of the pandemic is not available in the public domain. It is difficult to know the numbers of men, women, children and how many of them were from the marginalized section. Such disaggregated data is necessary to know the extent of marginalization so that appropriate policy responses can be formulated. This reflects badly on policymaking.



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Ms Tete said another problem is that during the pandemic Anganwadi and ASHA workers were diverted to other duties, mainly the data collection. This was at the cost of pre and post-natal care of pregnant women. She said that non-availability of contraceptives and medical assistance gave rise to unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions.

The dialogue ended with a vote of thanks by Dr Asha Verma, Assistant Professor of Law and Head of the GNLU Centre for Women and Child Rights.

The dialogue was held under the aegis of GNLU Centre for Women and Child Rights in collaboration with Migration and Asylum Project.

**Media Contact:**

Ashok Shah

Email: 9909960240, 8849110049