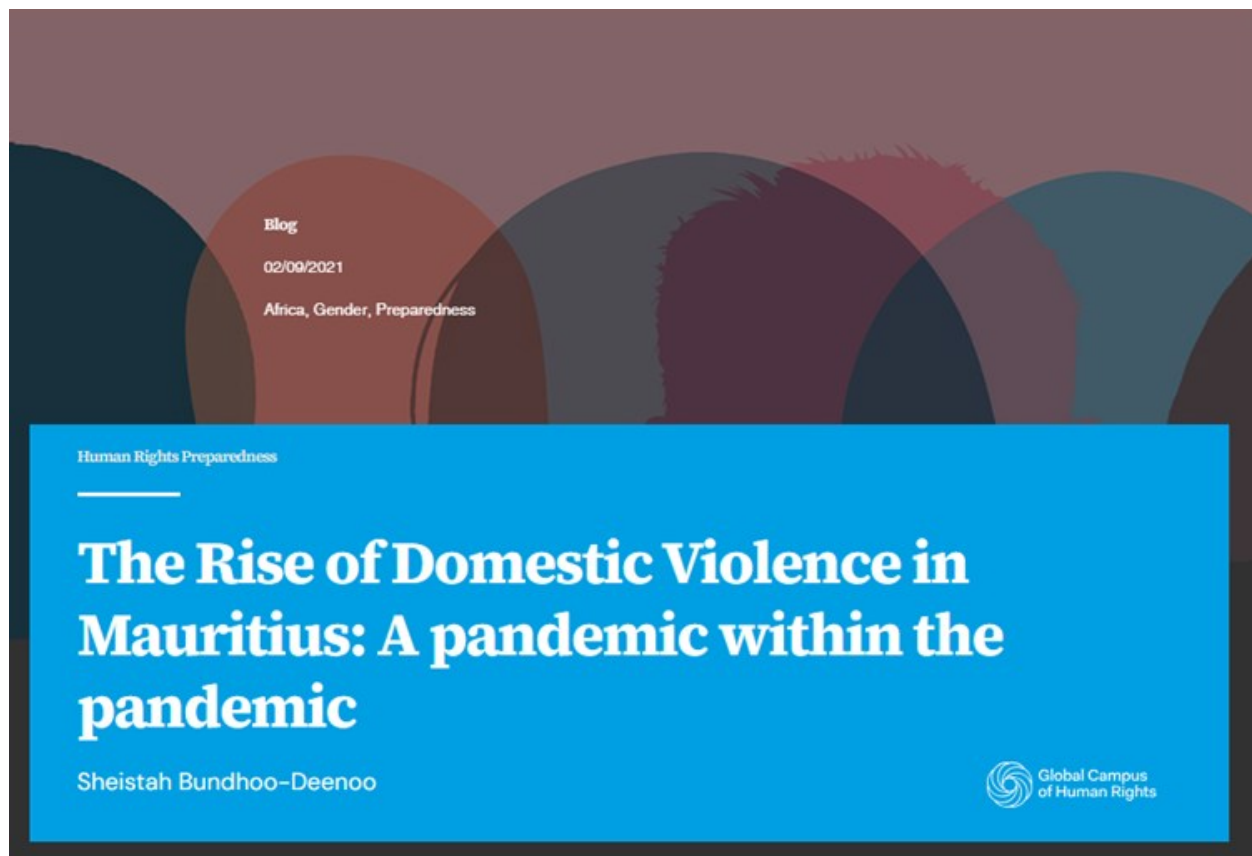




The Rise of Domestic Violence in Mauritius: A pandemic within the pandemic

Sheistah Bundhoo-Deenoo*

Abstract: there is a direct correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of violence against women in Mauritius. Domestic violence is a pandemic within the pandemic which often gets blurred out in discourse and policy. There is an urgent call for action to address this chaotic situation.

*Sheistah Bundhoo-Deenoo is an advocate for gender equality in the Republic of Mauritius. With a degree in Sociology and Gender Studies, she is currently pursuing a Master's in International Business from Curtin Mauritius. She is passionate about human rights, gender equality and corporate social responsibility.

Following the second phase of the coronavirus pandemic in Mauritius in March 2021, there was a rise in reported cases of violence against women. In April 2021, for example, the Minister of Gender Equality and Family Welfare (Gender Ministry) announced that there had been [293 reported cases](#) of domestic violence in just 18 days. Further, Statistics Mauritius has [noted](#) that out of the reported cases of domestic violence in Mauritius in 2020, 87.3% were women. Taken together, these statistics demonstrate the increased vulnerability of women and mandate investigation as to why legislation put in place to provide for the protection of women in Mauritius has not worked in practice.

Domestic violence prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

A 2018 study, [Sociological Profiling of Perpetrators of Domestic Violence in Mauritius](#), had previously identified excessive alcohol consumption, unemployment, long hours of work, substance misuse and gender inequality within the household as some of the triggers contributing to domestic violence on an island with fewer than 1.3 million inhabitants, where domestic violence has been [criminalised since 1997](#). Simultaneously, [poverty](#) and the disproportionate allocation of resources in terms of access to job opportunities, coupled with the gender pay gap lead to women being discriminated against in the labour force. In 2021, Mauritius is ranked 110 out of 156 countries according to the World Economic Forum [Global Gender Gap Index](#).

In 2018, the State of Mauritius received positive feedback from the [CEDAW Committee](#), the monitoring body for the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#), regarding amendments of the [Protection from Domestic Violence Act](#) to reinforce protection for survivors of domestic violence. Nonetheless, in the same report, the Committee noted several drawbacks such as the low prosecution rates, problems with the quality of assistance, inadequate monitoring mechanisms under the legislation and lack of accurate data regarding domestic violence. These comments demonstrate that there is a need to put in place a holistic programme to tackle the problem of domestic violence in general in Mauritius. In addition, the United Nations Secretary General has called on Member States to [incorporate prevention actions](#) regarding domestic violence in countries' national COVID recovery programmes. This call for action applies to Mauritius as much as to other UN member states. Moreover, as a signatory of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa ([Maputo Protocol](#)), Mauritius is required to ensure the respect of women's and girls' rights across all spheres and at all times. This implies that the State should be even more strategic in regards to [law enforcement](#) during the pandemic period

A pandemic within the pandemic: 293 reported cases in 18 days

Explanations for the rise in domestic violence in Mauritius during the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- More time spent with the abuser at 'home' in a closed and forced space with limited or no escape
- Victims are cut off from support systems such as schools, workplaces or even police stations
- Some shelters for women were not accommodating residents during the pandemic, which meant that women at risk had nowhere to go
- A pandemic-related rise in [unemployment](#), which created financial dependency on the partner.

These explanations expose a problem with the slogan '[Stay Home](#)' which was popular on diverse media platforms throughout the pandemic. The slogan was also on the lips of many Mauritians asking each other to be cautious of the virus; it became a common greeting. Unfortunately as the statistics show, not everyone was safe at home. Moreover, as explained in the [Gendered Voices Newsletter](#) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Mauritius, there was no established place of safety for women in distress during the pandemic. [Legal aid and support](#) were delayed due to the pandemic with the strict restriction of movement. At the same time, not all women had the [literacy](#) needed to understand which helplines they needed to seek out, or how to engage with bureaucratic procedures. Lack of awareness amongst, and information to, the population as a whole also meant that women continued to live with their abusers.

Preparing for a pandemic within the pandemic

[The Shadow Pandemic Report](#) published by UN Women demonstrates that various stakeholders have a key role to play to eliminate the escalation in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. UN Women has been prioritising access to essential health care services, legal aid, social services and support to women victims of domestic violence. Simultaneously, for EU states, the [European Institute for Gender Equality](#) has been supporting strategic planning and funding of support services to better combat the rise of domestic violence.

So, how might we implement a preparedness programme for this pandemic within the pandemic in Mauritius?

It is crucial to have a well-defined framework and programme for women in need of assistance, including:

- Ease of access to health care facilities and a fast track for women victims of physical violence who should receive treatment in accordance with all ethical standards (including confidentiality) in public hospitals. This implies that there needs to be a one-stop emergency counter for the patient where she completes all the administrative processes related to the reported case of domestic violence.
- A fast track for reporting cases of domestic violence. Response to such cases should be immediate whereby the person calling the hotline should be given clear instructions on what can be done, the implications and the way forward. Having a 'fast track' also implies that the caller is transported to the police station, hospital or a place of safety/ shelter.
- Proper data collection and recording of information through a trusted information system. This will allow a better analysis of the situation of violence against women, help to establish trends and generate regular reports.
- Accommodation spaces for women and children in need to ensure that they are in a place of safety. This could be done by providing funding to NGOs to increase their accommodation capacity.
- Psychological and legal assistance by trained personnel for survivors of violence. This can be done over the phone when there are movement restrictions.

It can thus be said that there is an urgent need to come up with a preparedness plan to combat violence against women in Mauritius. In fact, the UNDP has [recognised](#) the rising rate of violence against women and highlighted that the [National Strategy and Action Plan](#) 2020-2024 of the Gender Ministry should help combat several problematic areas around domestic violence in the country. There is a lot of hope that this Strategy and Plan will help overcome the challenges and disadvantages to which women are subject. Only time will tell.