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The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges on Social Issues

COVID-19: crisi e sfide nella società

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“A Pandemic within the Pandemic”

A CDA of Social Media Comments on Domestic Violence during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Violence against women is a ubiquitous phenomenon, characterised by a series of psychological, physical, sexual, and persecutory acts that cause harm and suffering of various kinds to the victim. The issue, already declared a pandemic by the UN Secretary General in 2008, became a worrying pandemic within the pandemic with the outbreak of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19 in the early 2020s. From the beginning, the media and specialised services spoke of a possible increased risk of adverse outcomes for the health and well-being of those already living in vulnerable situations before the onset of COVID-19. The threat was due to forced confinement (lockdown) and the difficulties for victims living with the abuser to report and turn to support services. A vital role in the rethinking and reorganisation of services and in the networking that has underpinned social work in the emergency period is represented by the use of technology and the modification of information flows that followed. A strong propensity emerges for the widespread use of digital tools, of the net in the widest sense, up to the use of social media, both to intercept beneficiaries and for the provision of services and their communication. The present study investigates user-generated discourse about domestic violence during COVID-19 by examining the replies to a Facebook post by the World Health Organization (WHO) (on 24 June 2021) reporting the increased risk for women during the pandemic. Critical Discourse Analysis represents a valid framework to investigate social media communication as expressing ideological meanings and sustaining hierarchically gendered social orders. In particular, the study seeks to identify the discursive means employed by online users to frame domestic abuse and express their position. It has also uncovered how the users exploit the topic to convey their views on other issues related to COVID-19 (e.g. vaccines, government policies).

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse analysis; COVID-19; domestic violence; social media discourse; user generated content (UCG).

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a deeply rooted and pervasive problem that transcends borders, cultures, and social strata. It takes on various forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and cultural violence, and leaves behind a trail of suffering and harm. Among these forms, domestic violence, also referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), stands out as a prevalent and distressing phenomenon that affects countless women worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported on June 24, 2021, the increased risks women face during the pandemic. Before delving into the discussion of violence against women during the lockdown, it is essential to clarify the terminology used in this essay. For the purposes of this work, we will primarily use the term “domestic violence” to refer to a range of abusive behaviours that occur within a domestic setting. While “intimate partner violence” is related and often used interchangeably, it specifically refers to abusive behaviours within intimate or romantic relationships. By adopting the definition of “domestic violence”, we intend to encompass a wider spectrum of relationships, to comprehensively address the diverse forms of violence against women within the home environment, as highlighted by the WHO. However, we acknowledge that the issue of violence against women during lockdowns may encompass both domestic violence and intimate partner violence and may extend to broader concerns related to gender-based violence and abuse (Capaldi *et al.* 2012). The choice of terminology is made here for the sake of clarity and relevance to the scope of this essay.

The United Nations *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* provides a comprehensive definition of violence against women.

The term violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. (Art. 1 *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, December 20, 1993)

Domestic violence refers explicitly to abuse in intimate partner relationships, often involving husbands, partners, boyfriends, or ex-boyfriends (Carnero *et al.* 2022).

Extensive research demonstrates that domestic violence is not an isolated occurrence but a worrying “constant” in women’s lives (Campbell *et al.* 2009). Sadly, the very individuals who should provide support and care – intimate partners – often become the perpetrators of violence against women. The consequences of domestic violence on the physical and mental health of abused women and girls are profound. The physical injuries resulting from physical violence can be debilitating, leading to chronic pain, disabilities, and even death. Furthermore, the emotional and psychological toll of abuse can scar victims for a lifetime, eroding their self-esteem, causing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Norman *et al.* 2014; Jonker *et al.* 2019) and impeding their ability to trust others. Additionally, the cycle of violence often perpetuates economic hardship, as women may be forced to leave their jobs or lose economic independence due to their abusers’ control.

Given the staggering prevalence of domestic violence, a global response is necessary. The UN special rapporteur on violence against women, Rashida Manjoo (2012), identifies domestic violence as the most pervasive form of violence continuing to afflict women worldwide. Shockingly, most reported cases of violence against women involve domestic violence, where abuse occurs within pre-existing relationships (UNICEF 2006). While isolated incidents of sexual violence by strangers in public spaces cannot be discounted, it is within the confines of the home that women face their gravest danger.

2. COVID-19

The emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan province, China, in December 2019 led to a global health crisis that impacted the world in ways that are unprecedented in human history. The pandemic has been characterised by its extensive reach, intensity, and far-reaching consequences, as well as the diverse range of actions taken to combat it.

The outbreak triggered a complex and articulated response from local and international authorities, given the severity of the situation and the multiplicity of counteracting actions required to mitigate its devastating effects. Swift action and organisational capacity were crucial in several countries to fight, slow down and eventually reverse an otherwise catastrophic trend.

By the first months of 2020, the media and specialised services started to talk about a probable future increase in cases of violence

against women in the home because of the increased risk of violence due to forced confinement (lockdown) and the difficulties for victims living with the abuser to report and turn to support services (Graham-Harrison *et al.* 2020; Grierson 2020; Mittal 2020).

In particular, in numerous cases, women who were already unemployed, or lost their jobs due to the widespread closures resulting from the imposed restrictive measures, were more vulnerable to domestic violence, as they were forced to stay at home for extended periods. Consequently, their financial dependency on their abusive partners deepened, making it harder to escape the cycle of violence (Arenas-Arroyo *et al.* 2021; Usta *et al.* 2021).

The global pandemic thus gave rise to a distressing phenomenon that has been described as a “pandemic within a pandemic” (Evans *et al.* 2020)¹. Hidden from the majority, this silent crisis thrived behind the closed doors of homes that were supposed to provide shelter from external threats. As the world grappled with the pandemic outbreak, an alarming increase in violence against women occurred, albeit discreetly, during the initial lockdown.

It is ironic that the domestic sphere, typically a place of refuge and safety, can sometimes become a suffocating environment that exacerbates abusive behaviour by intimate partners. Unfortunately, many women have found themselves trapped in these seemingly safe confines, unable to escape higher levels of violence. This violence lies in the relational imbalance between the sexes and the desire for control and possession by the male gender over the female gender (Kaukinen 2020) – which cuts across all cultures, social classes, ethnicities, ages, education and income levels.

As society was experiencing an abrupt disruption, individuals were forced to rapidly reorganise their lives, attempting to navigate an unfamiliar landscape. Unfortunately, this reorganisation was accompanied by an excruciating decision for women in danger: to endure the fear of the virus or the anguish of violence.

¹ The phrase “a pandemic within a pandemic” has become increasingly recognised in the context of COVID-19 as a way to describe the hidden dangers that have arisen as a result of the pandemic. This term was initially coined by Stephen Lewis (2004), a UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, during a press conference at the 15th International AIDS Conference in Bangkok. It has since been adopted by Evans *et al.* (2020) as a means of articulating the consequences of COVID-19, and has gained widespread acceptance among those who have experienced its hazardous and often imperceptible effects. Notable individuals such as Natalia Kanem (executive director of the UN Population Fund) and Janice Underwood (Virginia’s chief diversity officer) have also embraced this definition.

The increase in the number of cases of gender-based violence worldwide due to the pandemic was clearly indicated by the survey published by the United Nations in July 2020, which called this phenomenon a “shadow pandemic” precisely to underline its devastating impact (Sri *et al.* 2021).

At an international and European level, recommendations and guidelines have been provided to deal with emergencies of violence (European Commission 2020; United Nations Women 2020; WHO 2020), which have emphasised the need to strengthen specialised support and hospitality services for women, both in terms of the number of facilities and working methods, first and foremost the possibility of operating remotely, and to facilitate access through widespread institutional communication and service guidance for victims.

The focus was also on the more crucial aspect of networking by the specialised and general services to cope with the particular criticality that cases of violence assume in a health emergency and on the need to provide adequate financial support to the services also to be able to operate safely.

Given the concerning data regarding domestic violence and its amplified prevalence during the pandemic, the World Health Organization not only provided recommendations to local governments, but also shared a post on their Facebook page on June 24th, 2021, which sparked numerous reactions (refer to section 5). In light of the significance of this issue, it was deemed important to explore how it was perceived by citizens.

3. INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In today’s digital age, social media has become a crucial instrument for public officials looking to interact with their constituents. Whether it is TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, or any other platform, the ability to connect with a diverse audience is unparalleled. Through social media, governments can promote their campaigns, raise awareness of key initiatives, and engage with the public in a way that was once impossible. As such in today’s world, social media has become an indispensable and powerful tool for governments to communicate with their citizens effectively. Likewise, international organisations also utilise these platforms to disseminate their initiatives across multiple domains to the general public.

In the healthcare sector, social media have been increasingly used by governmental and non-governmental institutions – such as politi-

cal authorities and experts – as a strategic tool to raise public awareness and disseminate health information (Gough *et al.* 2017). Social media platforms offer public health professionals numerous opportunities and benefits including disseminating knowledge to the public, combating false information, maintaining communication during emergencies, expanding the reach of current resources and recruitment initiatives, providing answers to frequently asked questions, and encouraging citizen participation.

This trend in the use of social media in healthcare reached unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the importance of communicating reliable health messages to the community during public health emergencies (Lazarus *et al.* 2022) and necessitated the attempt to increase trust in scientific expertise (van Dijck and Alinejad 2020). At the same time, citizens' use of social media to obtain news and information related to COVID-19 was steadily increasing (Nielsen *et al.* 2020).

The participation of citizens in platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok during crises was thus crucial to the ability of governments and international organisations to understand citizens' concerns and priorities and how to reduce panic and anxiety (Chen *et al.* 2020).

Many studies (Moorhead *et al.* 2013; Huesch *et al.* 2016) have already shown that the use of social media can positively influence awareness of public health measures and prevention behaviours. It is therefore worth mentioning that communications of specific health and political actors were often directed at (or at least mentioned) target population groups, whose acceptance of the measures was deemed essential to achieve the desired political outcome (e.g. Martin *et al.* 2020).

4. USER GENERATED CONTENT (UGC)

In today's digital era, the Internet has facilitated a participatory culture where users actively generate and control communication through various online platforms (Rathore and Panwar 2016). User-generated content (UGC) refers to media content, such as text, images, videos, or comments, created and shared by users who are not professional producers. Social media has led to the spread of UGC, characterising it as a mass phenomenon (Prunesti 2013).

UGC has gained immense significance in the context of social media platforms, such as Facebook, which have become crucial channels for governments and institutions to engage with the public. Citizens actively participate in sharing opinions, experiences, and perspectives, thus transforming themselves from passive consumers into active contributors. This shift testifies to the evolving dynamics of public engagement in the digital era (Blanchard *et al.* 2008). Through their participation in online platforms, citizens now have the opportunity to voice their opinions and interact directly with governments and institutions. Citizen responses to posts are vital in enhancing public participation, promoting transparency, and holding authorities accountable (Stromer-Galley 2004). Such responses serve as a democratic check, facilitating dialogue and enabling policymakers to gain insight into public sentiment and concerns (Kwak *et al.* 2010; Gerodimos 2012). Through contributing to content generation, citizens actively shape and influence public narratives and policy dialogue, while promoting knowledge exchange amongst peers. This process empowers individuals with the information needed to make informed decisions (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013).

It is essential to note that UGC differs from traditional news media due to its raw and emotional nature and its ability to convey powerful messages through passionate storytelling (Sycora *et al.* 2022). By sharing personal experiences, citizens contribute to a diverse and inclusive discourse, bringing attention to marginalised voices and issues. The interactive nature of online platforms allows for dialogue, collaboration, and the formation of virtual communities centred around shared interests and concerns (Herring *et al.* 2005; 2015). The power of citizen responses lies in their ability to challenge dominant narratives and establish alternative discourses.

5. AIMS

On a global scale, the World Health Organization (WHO) was particularly active, creating dedicated pages on its website that featured stories, videos, information, and recommendations. The WHO also worked with other institutions, such as the European Union and FIFA, to launch campaigns against domestic violence.

On June 24, 2021, the WHO shared a brief yet informative post on their Facebook page highlighting the issue of domestic violence amid the lockdown (*Fig. 1*).

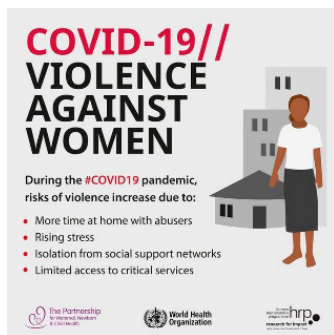


Figure 1. – WHO post June 24, 2021.

Like numerous other social media posts, the communication shared by the WHO aimed to encourage public involvement and feedback. However, the comments received on the post revealed some unexpected and worrying realities related to the topic.

The present study aims at investigating user-generated discourse about domestic violence during COVID-19. It focuses on the discursive means employed by online users to frame domestic abuse and express their position. It also wishes to uncover whether the users exploit the topic to convey their views on other issues related to COVID-19 (e.g. vaccines, government policies).

6. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This investigation aims to scrutinise a dataset of user-generated online comments that were posted on the official WHO Facebook page. As of December 30th, 2021, the WHO post had garnered 5445 comments. However, for the purpose of analysis, comments that solely contained emoticons, one or two exclamation words (such as “Oh!”, “ewww”, “nope”, “preach”, “very true”), incomprehensible or out-of-context responses, or those that violated community guidelines were removed from the corpus. The resulting corpus consists of 3,557 comments collected between March 19, 2020 and December 30, 2020, containing a total of 76542 tokens and 16488 types. For the quantitative aspect, Ant-Conc corpus investigation software was used as a support to the analysis. Frequencies were utilised to identify trends within the dataset and served

as a starting point for qualitative analysis, in this case, discursive indicators of ideological discourses. This provided a quantitative element to the research.

Although the sample size in this analysis was relatively small, it provided valuable insights into the linguistic strategies employed by respondents to the WHO post expressing their opinions. To ensure the dependability of this research, various factors must be considered, including the suitability of the corpus in the broader context of the pandemic period and its relevance, given the authority of the organisation that published the post and the scale of the awareness-raising campaign during the specific period.

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the discursive practices of citizens, all available responses were included as they were representative of the period under review. To effectively analyse this corpus, the principles of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), as described by Partington and Marchi (2015, 217), were used. This approach uses corpus linguistic techniques to identify potentially relevant areas of text, which can then be qualitatively explored and tested for representativeness. The aim is to balance the rigour of numerical analysis and the detail of language, following the guidelines by Partington and Marchi (2015, 215).

In the realm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Fairclough's three-part analytical model for CDA is used to analyse text, discourse practice, and social practice. This provides a qualitative element to research.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis provides a valuable lens to explore user-generated responses to domestic violence. This approach makes it possible to identify recurring themes, capture different perspectives and uncover explicit and implicit discourses within the corpus and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions surrounding domestic violence.

Cameron's "Feminism and linguistic theory" (2007) explores how language reinforces gendered ideologies. By examining the intersection between feminist theory and linguistic analysis, her work sheds light on how language is used to shape discourse on gendered issues, including domestic abuse against men. Cameron's insights reveal the complexities of gendered power dynamics in language use.

Before commencing the analysis, it is important to note that gender/sex information of the comment authors was not collected. This decision was made due to the inherent difficulty in ascertaining the true identities of individuals who engage in online discourse on social media platforms

such as Facebook. Although Facebook implements policies to encourage users to provide genuine information, these policies are not always stringently enforced, and some users may choose to remain anonymous or use pseudonyms (Adjei *et al.* 2020).

It is finally worth noting, especially in light of the topic under consideration in this study, that victims and survivors of online abuse – many of whom it is reasonable to imagine to be among those who responded to the WHO post – are particularly vulnerable to various risks. As such, pseudonymous or anonymous profiles often serve as a crucial means of safeguarding against the perils of monitoring, harassment, impersonation, and stalking (Dimond *et al.* 2011; Haimson *et al.* 2016).

7. ANALYSIS

After careful reading, the comments were grouped into 11 categories according to the interest expressed by the users and labelled accordingly (cf. Braun and Clarke 2006).

The *Table 1* below shows the results of the thematic grouping of user comments as well as tokens and types.

*Table 1. – List of thematic categories of user's responses, tokens and types.
Source: Author's elaboration.*

CATEGORY	N. OF COMMENTS	TOKENS	TYPES
1. What about men	1389	33272	4985
2. Anti-WHO, government and lockdown	1289	24850	5170
3. Women need more help	294	8467	2200
4. No correlation between lockdown and domestic violence	101	3152	989
5. Pro lockdown	59	2081	810
6. What about children	54	1113	501
7. Practical solutions are needed	51	994	471
8. Sexist and racist comments	49	1156	593
9. Anti-China	36	680	342
10. The post was written too late	20	494	255
11. Domestic violence is related to alcohol and poverty	15	283	172
TOTAL	3357	76542	16488

Table 2 offers some examples for each identified category.

Table 2. – Examples from each identified category.

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE
1. What about men	And violence against men, when do we talk about it,? A taboo subject for too long!
2. Anti-WHO, government and lockdown	I am happy! All here is against WHO! Go people!
3. Women need more help	u r desperate for men. Lol dear I myself am a man. and it is fact that women suffer more than men in life.
4. No correlation between lockdown and domestic violence	LOts of people have found themselves in this situation and dont resort to domestic violence. an abuser is an abuser regardless.
5. Pro lockdown	We were in lock down for a reason OR didn't you know.
6. What about children	Do not forget the violence against children, which, in way worse, regardless of Gender.
7. Practical solutions are needed	Yes everyone knows this is the reality of many women and men, what about the solutions?
8. Sexist and racist comments	In case you haven't noticed, everything is about women and blacks. Ever get the feeling you're being played?
9. Anti-China	what about an ad calling out China...
10. The post was written too late	And it's only NOW that youre talking about it? Stfu.
11. Domestic violence is related to alcohol and poverty	Al Cap domestic violence is most of the time the cause of alcohol abuse.

The thorough analysis of the thematic breakdown (*Tab. 1*) offered, amongst others, an insightful and unpredictable result emerged. Surprisingly, the topic that gathered the most attention and generated the highest number of interactions was that of men who are victims of domestic violence.

In view of the outcomes derived from the categorisation of the responses generated by the users, it was considered appropriate to carry out a verification process to swiftly comprehend the linguistic landscape and the use of vocabulary. With the help of the Antconc software, a list of the most frequently occurring words in the entire corpus was obtained. The results (*Tab. 3*) show an evident prevalence of the word “men” (1181) over “women” (913), followed by “violence” (146) and “abuse” (354).

These results thus supported the thematic division of the answers that was reported above.

*Table 3. – Most common words (number of hits) in the dataset.
Source: AntConc elaboration.*

TYPE	RANK	FREQ	RANGE
men	4	1181	9
women	11	913	10
violence	14	746	10
against	27	445	9
people	31	395	11
abuse	36	354	10
covid	46	270	9
end	48	261	9
stop	50	254	10
abused	57	216	8
domestic	66	182	7
lockdowns	66	182	5
woman	66	182	9
children	76	165	8
man	79	151	8
victims	82	148	8
pandemic	91	132	9
abusers	96	127	5
gender	99	114	7
lockdown	99	114	6

7.1. *Violence and abuse*

The initial step in analysing the discourse strategies employed by the participants in the discussion is to focus on the predominant group of responses, which, given the results of the frequency list, regards men as the primary victims of domestic violence.

The WHO defines domestic violence, or rather Intimate partner violence, as the abusive behaviour of one or both partners in an intimate relationship, without any reference to gender:

Intimate partner violence refers to behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours. (WHO 2012, 1)

When discussing the topic of domestic violence, it is common to associate the victim as a woman and the perpetrator as a man. This perception is often reinforced by media outlets, which tend to highlight the one-sided nature of domestic violence. Attempts to raise awareness about the equally serious problem of violence against men are often disregarded. This is likely due to the evidence from various studies and surveys conducted globally, which consistently demonstrate that domestic abuse against women occurs twice as often as it does against men (Thureau 2015; Office for National Statistics UK 2019; Warburton Raniolo 2020; Fanslow *et al.* 2022).

With the support of the AntConc software, a search was conducted to investigate further and verify the use of one of the two key terms in the corpus, “*violen**”, within the entire corpus, i.e. of all thematic groupings. The results returned a picture confirming what emerged from the thematic grouping and from an initial overview of the word list and WHO indications mentioned above. The term “*violence*”, which, as shown in the table above, appears with a rank of 14 and 746 occurrences, shows notable results in the following clusters: “*violence against men*” (151 times), “*violence against women*” (76 times), “*violence against children*” (7 times). These results, although quantitative, are valuable to confirm the orientation of the users’ answers and serve as a guide for further analysis.

It was therefore considered worthwhile to investigate the other of the two terms that refer to and are closely related to victims of domestic violence, namely “*abuse*”. Proceeding with the investigation of the term “*abuse*” used as a noun, it was observed that the most frequent collocations of the term “*abuse*”, among the most frequently used in the analysed corpus, are the following: “*domestic abuse*” (41), “*mental abuse*” (11), “*physical abuse*” (9), “*emotional abuse*” (5), “*verbal abuse*” (4).

Through the examination of prevalent collocations, it has become apparent that the discourse surrounding domestic violence is deeply impacted by power dynamics and social constructs. These factors shape how individuals perceive and understand the experiences of victims. In the following examples and all those quoted in this article, the author has used italics to highlight the words deemed worthy of attention; capitalisation, on the other hand, is reported in full from the posts.

- (1) Don't forget men can suffer *domestic* abuse just as much as woman.
- (2) This shouldn't say women, it should just be *domestic* abuse as a whole.
- (3) Oh now you care about the more *domestic* abuse people have been experiencing since covid.
- (4) how many would laugh at the *mental* abuse?
- (5) and what about the *mental* abuse of women against men?
- (6) It's not just about *physical* abuse, it's *verbal* and *mental* abuse too!
- (7) As a victim of systematic *emotional* abuse of 5 years before I sought to break free from it this could be worded a little differently to not exclude anyone.
- (8) men can be guilty of *physical* abuse, women guilty of *emotional* abuse.
- (9) The effect of a Woman's *verbal* abuse of her male partner will often be longer lasting than physical damage.

The expression “domestic abuse” is a dominant collocation within the discourse, drawing attention to the private sphere as the primary site of violence. This reinforces the notion that these issues are confined to the home and not openly discussed. Another significant example is “mental abuse”, which highlights the psychological manipulation employed by abusers. The collocations, such as “domestic abuse”, “mental abuse”, and “physical abuse”, transcend mere descriptive language; they function as discursive tools employed by users to not only label but also legitimise the issue at hand. These terms are deeply rooted in institutional and academic discourse, and by adopting them, users reinforce the gravity of domestic violence against women, framing it as a well-recognised and pervasive problem. It could be posited that this strategic use of terminology allows users to position themselves as advocates, signalling their commitment to addressing this critical societal concern. Consequently, these specific collocations serve as a linguistic mechanism through which users express a clear and unwavering stance in favour of tackling domestic violence against women, thereby fostering a discourse that promotes awareness, action, and social change. Furthermore, the collocations “physical abuse”, “verbal abuse”, and “emotional abuse” emphasise the forms of harm, whether visible or intangible (Easteal *et al.* 2012; Tsui *et al.* 2012). These collocations underscore the detrimental effects on victims' well-being and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of abuse. Collectively, aforementioned collocations provide insight into the multifaceted nature of domestic violence, resulting in a more nuanced and informed perspective on this critical issue.

7.2. “*What about men?*”: *anger and resistance in user-generated responses*

It is a common belief that men are unlikely to denounce being victims of domestic violence. Culturally considered to be the ‘stronger sex,’ men would have to deal with the shame they would feel in publicly admitting that they are subservient to their partners to such an extent that they consider themselves victims of their violence. Moreover, even if it were not a problem of social stigma (Goffman 2009), very often physical or psychological violence is not recognised as such, especially if it is established as a relational mode within the couple and family. Women, moreover, biologically have less physical strength than males. This is why it is considered highly unlikely that women are capable of committing physical violence against a man. Nevertheless, this is untrue: women scratch, bite, pull hair, and throw objects. Many of them carry out violent behaviour against their partners without fear of repercussions because they are perfectly aware that even if the man tries to report the incident, his testimony might be considered bizarre or, in any case, unreliable (Perry 2014).

Upon careful analysis of the largest group of user responses, it was significant to identify that the prevalent themes that emerge with striking clarity relate to deep frustration and are directed towards society’s and institutions’ convention of considering women as the only victims of violence. This is despite the global recognition (supported by extensive research and statistical data in section 1) that intimate partner violence is a gender issue that disproportionately affects women in terms of severity, patterns, intentions, and the genders of the victim and perpetrator. There is an urgent plea for assistance and intervention to counteract the deeply rooted stereotype of the male gender as the stronger sex, which impedes men from speaking out and seeking help. Additionally, the comments vehemently denounce the pervasive indifference and disregard towards those who display the courage to report the abuse they have endured (Tsang *et al.* 2020).

The analysis reveals a significant presence of anger in the user-generated responses (Breeze 2020), expressed through various means by male users. Expressions such as “stop”, “STOP THIS RIGHT NOW !!!!!” and “That is wrong labelling!” are expressions of anger which serve as direct commands and intensify the emotional tone of the discourse and conveying a sense of urgency and demand immediate action (Chan 2014).

- (10) The fact they’ve [WHO] stated it’s just women is what’s *wrong* with the world it happens to men aswell.

- (11) This is such a *wrong* approach! This shouldn't say women, it should just be domestic abuse as a whole. men are abused too. Shocked that the WHO would be so arrogant to that knowledge.
- (12) Happens to men just as much. *Wrong* no matter which way you look at it.
- (13) But why label it Covid-19 // Violence Against Women? That is *wrong* labeling! be more like Covid- 19 // Violence Against Spouses!!! Men get abused everyday too and even worse now since being suck at home with their abuser! *Stop* putting gender on spousal abuse!
- (14) *STOP THIS RIGHT NOW* !!!!!..... there is violence toward men and children too....any violence is *wrong*, so quit with singling out of men... you exacerbate the problem.....

The responses from users who support men exhibit a strong resistance against gendered narratives surrounding domestic violence. Specifically, phrases like “Stop putting gender on spousal abuse!” (13) highlight the rejection of gender-specific labels and the call for a more inclusive discourse. By challenging the gendered framing of domestic violence, these users aim to advocate for recognising male victims and question societal assumptions about gender roles and violence. This resistance is a form of empowerment and agency in the face of oppressive discourses.

The word “wrong” is repeatedly used as a heated expression to convey discontent, as seen in example (11) “This is such a wrong approach!”. This use of “wrong” challenges the notion of women as the sole victims of domestic violence and advocates for a more inclusive understanding that also recognises men as victims. Facebook users in this group thus use discursive tactics such as “wrong” and “stop” to contest dominant discourse, disrupt hierarchies of power, and assert alternative perspectives that emphasise the significance of acknowledging domestic abuse against men.

Swear expressions, such as offensive language or profanity, are also employed in some responses to intensify emotional reactions and assertively challenge dominant discourses. These expressions, though controversial, can function as a linguistic resource for individuals to convey strong emotions and disrupt established norms (Stapleton *et al.* 2022).

In the corpus, expressions such as “disgusting” and “Don't give me the bullshit about that only women get hurt” demonstrate the heightened emotional intensity facilitated by swear words.

- (15) You mean violence against anyone!!!! Enough with this woman *crap* more woman abuse men but men don't talk about it to anyone because we are meant to be these tough* ppl and if we talk we look *weak *so sick* of the woman *crap* what about us men!!

- (16) So *don't give me the bs* about that only women get hurt and need laws like men some have a sort of superpowers then talk about equality.... That's just *disgusting*.
(17) What a *Disgustingly* biased ad.

However, it is essential to note that the use of swear words in online discourse can also have negative implications, such as contributing to a hostile and polarised communication environment (Arancibia and Montecino 2017). It is crucial to critically assess the impact of such language on the overall tone and effectiveness of the discourse, as well as its potential to marginalise certain voices further or perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

7.3. Lockdown: frustration, anger, and fear

Contrary to what emerged in the hard months of the pandemic from press and television reports of the heated controversy surrounding vaccines, the primary concern of the people who participated in this conversation shifted decisively to the consequences of forced isolation in terms of both abuse and psychological stress and mistrust of communication by the authorities, all exacerbated by lockdowns.

The comments retrieved showcase evident frustration, anger, and fear among users, which is reflected in the intense and emotionally charged language they employ. Expressions such as “stop”, “must stop”, “end”, and “must end” coupled with terms like “lockdown”, “fake”, “lying”, and “farce” are loaded with intensity, suggesting the users’ strong disapproval and condemnation of both domestic abuse and the restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic.

Specifically, the imperative form “stop” (250) and “must stop” (7) combined with “lockdown” suggests a demand for an immediate cessation of the lockdown measures. This framing positions the lockdown as the primary problem that needs to be addressed, emphasising its negative impact on various aspects of society. Other interesting examples include the expressions “end” (261), “must end” (76) and “lockdown” in combination with terms such as “false” (20), “lie” (13), “lying” (11) and “farce” (2).

- (18) *STOP WITH THE LOCKDOWNS* and isolation! You are the cause.
(19) This [referring to lockdown] needs to *stop* at all times, covid is no excuse so stop giving the perpetrators one.
(20) *Stop* the lockdowns and censoring of dissenting views.
(21) We must end the *ISOLATION* a.k.a. *LOCKDOWN* for ever... The violence will never end in this type of society.

- (22) So you should stop this *fake* news abt Covid-19.
- (23) We must END *fake* pandemic. Stop violence from who.
- (24) We must end *fake* covid pandemic!
- (25) Stop with the lies and *crap* you peddle.
- (26) Covid is the organization not a virus its to control humanity and all this *fake* news stop lying the world!

The the examples above suggest scepticism and criticism towards the measures and the authorities' communication about the pandemic. The combination of these terms conveys a perception that the lockdown is ineffective and based on false information or hidden agendas. Users question the credibility and motives behind the measures, positioning them as a negative force.

It is worth noting the significant role that exclamations, modals, and imperatives play in conveying emotional intensity and stance on domestic abuse and lockdown measures in online discourse.

In Critical Discourse Analysis, exclamations convey urgency, demand attention, and emphasise the emotional charge associated with the issues being discussed. The use of exclamations such as “stop” (254 occurrences) and “end” (261) effectively captures the users' desire for immediate action and underscores the gravity of the situation. This linguistic strategy aligns with Fairclough's (2003) observation that exclamations function as alternatives to evaluative statements, allowing users to express their dissatisfaction and frustration more forcefully.

Moreover, the inclusion of exclamatory statements indicates an intention to engage the recipient and elicit a response (Napolitano 2018), which, in this context, implies active participation in online discourse. By using exclamations, users communicate their concerns about domestic abuse and lockdown measures and seek to create a sense of shared emotional experience and mobilise others to address these issues.

Notably, these exclamatory expressions reflect a diverse range of psychological attitudes (Byron and Heeman 1997), including anger and fear, which contribute significant additional meaning and convey the intensity of their sentiments. While these emotional elements do not alter the informative content of the users' utterances, they contribute significant additional meaning and convey the intensity of their sentiments.

7.4. *Modal verbs: what needs to be done*

The users' cry of protest is also expressed through the modals such as "must" (see examples 21, 23, 24) and "need to", used to assert a sense of obligation, necessity, or demand for action (Fairclough 1995) and which play a crucial role in user-generated responses retrieved for the corpus.

- (27) It's important for us to understand that men *need to* be taken into account as well.
- (28) Men and children *need to* be protected too.
- (29) ANTHONY FAUCI and BILL GATES *Need to* be JAILED and W H O Dissolved.
- (30) You all *need to* be on trial for terrorism and I hope soon.
- (31) People men or women *need to* stop looking for excuses to justify being violent to their partner.

By employing modal verbs, users express their expectations and position themselves as advocates for change. They suggest that specific actions are imperative to address the issues of domestic abuse and lockdown measures discussed in the corpus, positioning themselves as proactive and empowered agents seeking resolution.

The use of the modal "should" is equally significant as it can denote both a sense of obligation and desirability. It is important to note that the distinction between the two meanings can only be made by examining the context in which it appears.

- (32) This *should* be violence against people not just women.
- (33) There *should* be a gender equality.
- (34) Home *should* be safe.
- (35) WHO *should* stop COVID then and let people go out. WHO = Money making machine for Bill Gates and Pharmaceuticals.

According to Coates (1993, 59), the significance of "should" encompasses a broad range of implications, from providing subjective guidance to describing the correct objective procedure, all the way to conveying a strong sense of moral responsibilities and duties. In this corpus, it can be argued that "should" is utilised to convey a sense of obligation or duty that is characterised as being particularly "strong", similar to the type of messaging typically communicated by the modal "must".

7.5. *Capitalisation in user-generated content: Facebook responses*

The investigation of capitalisation in user-generated content, particularly in the context of Facebook responses, reveals intriguing aspects worthy of consideration. The following examples demonstrate how non-standard orthography, characterised by the use of capital letters for single words or phrases, is also used in the most vehement comments.

- (36) Domestic Violence AT A LOCATION!!!
- (37) Violence against BOTH men AND women needs to be abolished!
- (38) Well! There's a surprise. NOT.
- (39) The WHO makes the problems, points them out then expects others to clean up their mess. ANOTHER RUINED, ONCE GREAT ORGANISATION.
- (40) AND WHAT THE HECK DID THE WHO DO ABOUT IT??

Scholars have long debated the significance of non-standard orthography in written communication. The prevailing notion is that capital letters, when used extensively, are akin to “shouting” and convey a tone of anger, arrogance, and disrespect. However, recent studies conducted on Twitter shed light on alternative perspectives. It has been suggested that non-standard orthography, including capitalisation, can enhance the emotional impact of a message (Zappavigna 2012). In this view, writers employ capital letters and other unconventional orthographic features to encode prosody, effectively conveying the intended tone or emotion behind their words. Consequently, readers can decipher and interpret these linguistic cues to better grasp the writer's intended meaning.

The function of non-standard orthography in user-generated responses on Facebook is multi-faceted. Not only does it challenge conventional norms of written language, but it also serves as a tool for users to amplify the emotional content of their messages. By deviating from standard orthographic conventions, users can imbue their words with a heightened sense of intensity, passion, or urgency. This linguistic strategy allows them to draw attention, express frustration, and evoke strong emotional responses from their audience.

Furthermore, capitalisation and non-standard orthography in Facebook responses may also reflect the social dynamics within online communities. It can signify solidarity among like-minded users and resistance against perceived injustices or dominant narratives. The deliberate choice to capitalise certain words or phrases can serve as a form of linguistic activism, emphasising the importance of specific issues and signalling a collective voice demanding change.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought about a widespread health crisis and unveiled a distressing phenomenon known as the “pandemic within a pandemic”. Behind closed doors, within the supposed sanctuaries of homes, a silent crisis of increased violence against women unfolded. The domestic sphere, intended to provide refuge, became a stifling environment that amplified the abusive behaviour of intimate partners. As society grappled with the rapid reorganisation of daily life, women faced an agonising choice between the fear of the virus and the torment of violence. International and European recommendations and guidelines were put forth to address this emergency, emphasising the need to strengthen specialised support services, facilitate remote access, promote institutional communication, and ensure adequate financial support.

In light of concerning statistics, the World Health Organization provided guidance to local authorities and shared a post on its Facebook page on June 24th, 2021, which garnered significant attention and sparked various unexpected and controversial responses.

In fact, contrary to what one would have expected, only a very small percentage of responses focused on support for the WHO post and women and agreement with the distancing rules adopted by governments worldwide.

For the majority of the responses, the post turned out to be a sounding board, a public square in which users adopt a most angry tone in criticising the post published by the WHO, the stereotypical idea that sees men as abusers because they belong to the ‘stronger sex’, and not abused, the lockdown measures that have turned the home into a place of danger and fear. Last but not least, the demand for change in actions to combat domestic abuse is always expressed with strength, often mixed with anger, as well as an end to the distancing measures that isolate abuse victims.

The analysis of user-generated responses within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework reveals the utilisation of various discursive strategies in addressing the issues of domestic abuse and lockdown measures.

By examining of user-generated responses within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the implementation of various discursive strategies when addressing issues related to domestic abuse and lockdown measures. Users employ a range of linguistic devices to convey urgency, demand swift action, and express their emotions. These devices encompass exclamations and modal verbs that emphasize necessity.

Furthermore, users frequently employ non-standard orthographic techniques, such as capitalization, to infuse additional layers of meaning and emotional impact into their responses. Capital letters, in particular, intensify the emotional content of their messages, effectively conveying a sense of passion and urgency. This unconventional orthographic feature enables users to express their frustrations, capture attention, and cultivate a sense of solidarity among like-minded individuals.

By analysing these strategies, we can gain deeper insights into the complexities of social issues, such as domestic abuse and the consequences of lockdown measures, and contribute to fostering critical awareness and facilitating meaningful societal transformations.

The results obtained proved to be most particularly thought-provoking. Indeed, citizens' responses to controversial awareness-raising messages provide supranational institutions with critical feedback, opportunities for engagement, insights into public concerns, potential for trust-building, and opportunities to promote active citizenship. These responses offer valuable learning opportunities, even in negative comments and can contribute to supranational institutions' effectiveness and legitimacy.

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