

# The coronavirus lockdown is putting urban Indian couples to the test

With the shrinking of personal space, relationships have entered a phase of fragility.



A couple gets married in Mumbai on March 20. | Indranil Mukherjee/AFP

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By now, it is clear that the spread of coronavirus has harshly impacted the economy. The [International Monetary Fund chief Kristalina Georgieva](#) has declared that we have entered [recession](#) and economist [Jayati Ghosh](#) noted that [more damage has been done to the economy](#) in two days of lockdown than by demonetisation. This, along with the heart-wrenching site of migrant workers walking back home in the absence of transportation, has only added to the grim reality of the coronavirus pandemic.

There remains another sphere in which its impact will be most felt: that of marriage, family, and the household.

## Redefined spaces

Research on marriages in India has discussed how the sentiment of nibahana or endurance, resulting in adjustments and compromises, is often seen the key to a happy marriage. My research among the professional class in Delhi shows that contemporary middle-class Indians, while accepting this principle of marriage, also have novel ways of getting around it. Of these, the primary one is avoiding spending too much time with their spouse. This can easily be achieved when both partners are employed.

Indeed, it is this factor – not just the lure of a double income household – that is a motivating factor for many men to marry working women. “If a woman stays at home, she will just attend kitty parties and have plenty a time to pick fights,” claimed an employee at a multinational company looking for a wife.

This sentiment was echoed by others, including women. They insisted that not only does employment keep them busy, but also enables a “me space”, away from their spouse and household duties. Therefore, employment is not simply a marker of money and status, but also crucial to their mental health.

With the lockdown, the “me space” has collapsed. As couples are working from home and spending all day together, they are beginning to feel the weight of their relationships. The already pent-up resentments towards each other and other family members, and greater opportunity for potential conflicts, can upset household dynamics. In worst cases, it may lead couples to reconsider their compatibility.

[China reported a rise in divorce cases](#) right after the lockdown was lifted. Lawyers in other countries, including the United Kingdom and United States, are anticipating [a rise in divorce cases](#). Newspaper articles and magazines all over the world are addressing this pressing concern by suggesting ways in which couples can avoid conflict: they must do some activities together, but also find time apart from each other; they must divide labour and household chores; and they certainly must try and calm their nerves. Marriage and indeed all live-in partnerships, romantic or familial, have entered a phase of fragility.

## **A double burden**

A major brunt of this lockdown will be faced by the women of the house. Women – homemakers or working – are mostly the emotional sponges of their families, managing everyone’s emotions, catering to their needs. Scholarship by now has established that women who choose to stay at home perform important labour that is unaccounted for.

With the lockdown, while most urban professionals are working from home, perhaps with a reduced work expectation, women’s labour has increased as they are now expected to cater to all family members at all times. It is inevitable that the women of the house will feel more burnt out during this lockdown period, not only because they will be managing emotions and needs of all family members, but they will be cooking, cleaning, and supporting other members of the family.

It is an especially distressing time for victims of domestic violence. Credit: Shailesh Andrade/Reuters

The worst affected in this phase of lockdown will be victims of domestic abuse. [Recent reports](#) suggest that in Hubei province, domestic violence tripled. In Brazil, there has been noted a 40%-50% increase in case of reported domestic abuse, and Italy and Spain too have witnessed a spike. In India, the lockdown has imposed a situation where victims have to cohabit with her abuser for days in end. [Uttar Pradesh’s police has already pre-empted this situation and has launched a special hotline](#) to deal with the pressing issue of domestic violence especially during the lockdown period.

## Put to test

The test of fragility will not be restricted to marriage and romantic bonds but will also extend to friendships. Articles in newspapers and magazines suggest that one way to cope with isolation is by reaching out to friends for long chats. Indeed, film stars are busy posting about their catch-up sessions on social media. But what if the friend ends up being a punching bag, used to vent frustration of living with an ungrateful and unhelpful spouse, unruly children, or lack of help by a nanny or cook.

Indeed, the situation will surely affect our mental health. Not only will it lead to stress related to job security and debts, but it will bring to the fore hidden dysfunctionalities within families and relationships.

The United Kingdom, though slow to respond to the pandemic, has quickly turned its attention to this cause and has received assistance from the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, who are helping [spread awareness on importance of mental health](#) during these times. Companies as Google, including their India office, have now dedicated mental health channels for their employees to help them cope with any issues they might be facing in these current times. The Indian government too has launched a [mental health helpline](#).

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman described contemporary modernity as “liquid” because every relationship, encounter, and interaction is more fleeting and fragile. It seems Baumann’s theory has arrived at its moment of truth, for we are now engaging with time not just eluding it, and this will put a strain not simply on our economy but our everyday relationships. Romantic and non-romantic relationships have entered their most testing times in modern history.

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