

## BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE AND COPING STRATEGIES OF DOMESTICALLY ABUSED WOMEN: A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*It is undoubtedly a fact that domestic violence and its relationship in domestic settings is not much visible in any society. This research study is an essay to dig out the facts and narratives of the domestically abused women and the difficulties they face in their relationships with perpetrator and with family. Feministic approach is a tool used to dig the very essence of incumbent responsibilities performed by the survivors remaining in the relationship with the perpetrator and the coping strategies they adopt to satisfy their inner conscious too live in the same abusive relationship. In depth interviews are conducted to account for the lived experiences of the women survivors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 women who identified themselves as victims and survivors of domestic violence perpetrated by their husbands. There were seven themes identified in the study. The analysis of the results revealed that women were hesitant to disclose about their abusive relation with their husbands as family honor, lack of family support and social pressures were identified as main hindrances. There were seven major themes extracted from the interviews few are Mental agony, comprised relationship, social pressures, catharsis. Therefore, religious path and employment were recognized as sources of solace*

**Keywords:** Domestic abuse, violence, women, spirituality, mental agony

### INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is a form of aggression in family and private setting committed by men against his wife. The violence against women has many different forms and ways to be exercised. Women experience of violence has many facets (McQuigg & Ronagh, 2011). In fact, it is portrayed as the act of maltreatment of one's partner by the other in the context of a relationship (Healey et.al., 1998). That said, domestic abuse, violence between husband and wife, is impacted by a number of intricate social, cultural, and psychological aspects. Women are more prone toward physical, sexual and emotional violence in the relation (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). Domestic violence is a critical issue of many societies. It is related to family domain which is better understood by studying the pattern of patriarchy prevailed in a family which leads to the subjugation of women and various forms of abuse by husbands (Fikree et.al., 2005). According to (WHO, 2021), about 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced physical violence in their lifetime. Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner. The domestic violence problem has been identified as occurring across all religions, ethnicities, cultures, ages and economic status (Pyles & Postmus, 2004). It is estimated by WHO that 24, 097 women aged 15- 49 years showed that domestic violence and abuse, and varied by cultures and countries and between 15-71% of ever-partnered women have experienced domestic violence and abuse. (Ellsberg et al. 2008). The physical, emotional, psychological, and behavioral harm caused by domestic violence is more severe, in addition to being a significant strain on social services and the criminal justice system (Berry, 2000). Women with domestic abuse have higher risk of mental illness, 64% women experience post traumatic disorder, 48% depression and 18% attempt to suicide or commit suicide worldwide. There were an estimated 1.2 million women who experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales (Women Aid, 2012). Domestic violence is a significant social

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and public health problem in many countries (Heise, et.al., ,1994). Women face discrimination on all fronts, including but not limited to, political, legal, economical, and cultural. Some factors are poverty, low economic status, education, social status, norms, and traditions of the society, employment and family problems as well (Sricamsuk, 2006). According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) (2017–18), marital, physical, sexual, or emotional violence has been experienced by 34% of women who have ever been married. The most common type of spousal violence is emotional violence (26 percent), followed by physical violence (23 percent) and 56 percent of women in Pakistan who have experienced domestic violence have not sought any help or talked to anyone about resisting or stopping the violence. Pakistan has one of the worst records of violence against women, especially spousal violence (Ali, et. al., 2011). It is a critical and increasing issue, and in recent years the country has regularly attracted international media attention due to a number of gruesome acts of violence against women (Khan & Hussain, 2008). The patriarchal system has raised many eyebrows in different cultures due to the degraded position of women in various societies. Many studies depicted that women conceal the truth about them in abusive relation due to the honor of their families, threats, lack of family support, social dogmas and social stigma attached to women if their marriage is not successful (Izzidien, 2008). The knowledge on informal support was however, minimal in comparison to that of formal networks as any work in this area had focused on social agency responses (Moe, 2007). According to Drumm et al. (2014), for women who have experienced domestic violence, religion offers practical ways to transition from coping for survival to self-worth and healing.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

#### **Feminist perspective**

Theories are important in order to explain phenomenon such as domestic violence.

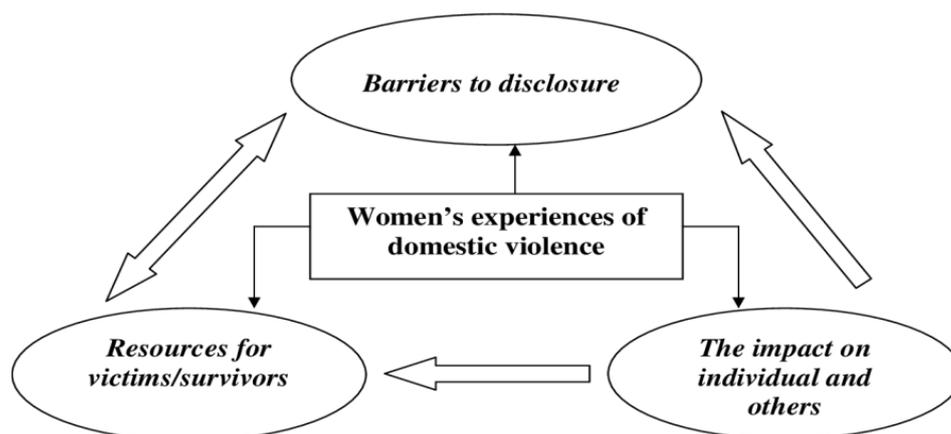
According to Yllo (2005), feminist theory has the social and cultural foundation which interpret the abuse by man as indication of male hegemony to control women socially, physically, emotionally and economically. Feministic perspective elucidates that the institute of marriage is the very first step to control women and subjugation lies in this relationship. The patriarchal system embedded in society pave the way to subjugate women by men in this very intimate relation of marriage. The imbalance of power exists in this relation and male chauvinism is the foundation of all the abusive tactics. This theory criticizes male hegemony and female subordination. As equity and equality are slaughtered in this relation when one party supersedes other by power and masculine hegemony. This masculinity is very much evident in the home setting when a husband beats or batters his wife knowingly that power is in his hands and she is a subject of passiveness. Similarly, Dobash and Dobash (1992) in their book ‘Violence Against Wives’ state that the coercive control of power exerted by a man over his female partner perpetuates violent behavior in their relationship.

According to Yllo and Bograd (1988), feminist perspective is described by four major dimensions:

- 1) The power and gender are social constructs which give right to men to exercise power over female which ultimately make man as the master and woman as slave. The social structures always allow man to be on upper side and women to act as a subject. The passivity of woman is described as all forms of dependency of wife on husband which ultimately provide men the right to control women.
- 2) Family is the social institution whose function is to create strong bonding but by peeling off different tiers of processes and functions of this institution reveals the position of women as weak creature which is dominated by the strong pillar of this institute male. The process, function and history of the institution of family is vital to understand the paradigm of subjugated role and position of women in this institution.
- 3). Women’s perspectives and experiences are important to be studied in order to understand their way of viewing their relations and position in family and society. The way woman behave in certain relation depends on her perspective of viewing the situations.
- 4). Women needs strong awareness systems which address the issues of women and highlight the need of expressing their experiences to exhibit the very nature of women’s rights advocacy through the feminist lens by developing processes and theories.

#### **Conceptual framework**

The aim of the conceptual framework is to exhibit the relation of different factors in an abusive relationship. The reasons why women conceal their perspective, remain in the abusive degraded relation and the impact on their lives due to non-disclosure of the routine abuse.



### **Aim**

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of domestically abused women and investigate the coping strategies adopted by these women

### **METHODS**

In this study, six women were consented to be interviewed. Five women were interviewed in their home setting while one was telephonically interviewed. They were all residents of Islamabad. There is no rule of thumb so data collection is done till the point of saturation. Women experience domestic abuse having the similar characteristics were inducted in the study. Married educated (Matric-post graduate level) women of age 18-49 years living in Islamabad were recruited in the study as study participants. The interviews were piloted on two participants who experienced domestic violence. The purpose of the pretest was to improve the interview guide. An interview guide prepared to get the in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon of domestic abuse and experiences of women from this study. The interview guide was translated in local language Urdu.

#### **Validation and Evaluation criteria**

The validation of the data was done through peer review. Data was collected and then analyzed, interpreted in codes, categories and themes. Once it is done, data was brought again to participants for member check for the credibility of data. The thickness of data and prolonged stay in field also reflect the validation of study. The evaluation of data will be identified on the basis of procedures truly followed as described for phenomenological studies, COREQ and trustworthiness of data being checked.

### **RESULTS**

Domestic abuse has become a global problem which needs to be addressed in an appropriate way by not only providing help to the survivor but dig out root causes and resolve it. Many women around the globe experience brutality in the hands of husbands or intimate partners but cannot act due to social pressures. In this study lived experiences of the survivors and their reasons of late disclosure or no disclosure are highlighted. The anonymity of the participants was protected by assigning each participant an alphabet which is only known by the researchers. Hence elements of privacy and confidentiality was assured by the researcher. Each of the participant's lived experience is described in as much detail as possible.

#### **Relationship with her husband**

**Participant B:** It was a compromise not a good relationship. Thing had never changed never changed in their relation. She quoted:

*"Have to compromise for kids now they are grown up"*

**Participant C:** It was an uncaring relation where there was nothing. She did not have any affection left for her husband. She wanted to leave that abusive relation but parents, society were big hindrance on her way. As quoted by her:

*"We may die but this stupid honor must prevail and make our parents proud"*

#### **Realization about abuse.**

**Participant A:** She realized soon after her marriage in the first year as her husband beat her. She realized that all that is happening was not right. The relation would be a compromise.

**Participant B:** She realized in first year of her marriage. Her husband started verbal abuse soon after marriage but in a span of one year he first time slapped her and then off and on this prevailed. She quoted:

*“I understood in the start but what could be done except to accept that and remain quiet”*

**Frequency of abuse.**

**Participant D:** Verbal abuse was a daily routine matter while once or twice beating was done in a month and slapping was very common. She quoted:

*“Verbal abusing and slapping were a routine matter”*

**Participant E:** Verbal abuse was common but beating was once in blue moon. But his anger was something that tense her. She said:

*“His anger put me in, under extreme pressure that I got pressurized mentally and even cannot do simple things correctly”*

**Disclosure to family/friends regarding domestic abuse.**

**Participant C:** she told it to her friend as she thought that society would blame woman for all.

*“Society always blame women and men get clean chit”*

When she thought the condition was unbearable she discussed with her friend only, still she didn't tell anything to her mother as her father had died and she did not want to disturb her mother.

*“Father has died now what? Should I kill by my mother by telling this all”?*

**Participant E:** She told her sister about this, after 3 years of her marriage. When her husband misbehaved with her in front of her sister and brother-in-law. She told her sister band felt relieved. She quoted:

*“My husband couldn't keep this a private affair and insulted me in front of them otherwise I was ready to keep it to myself (tearfully)”*

She could not discuss with whole family as she belonged to a conservative family. As she said:

*“My family is of that view; you got married now never come back, you have to go to grave from there.... No looking back”*

**Strategy adopted to cope with the situation and effectiveness.**

**Participant B:** She thought she did not have specific things to cope with the situation. Offering prayers and book reading gave her more relief in that situation. As quoted by her:

*“I just cry on that situation and offer namaz what else was the option”*

Her strategy was to attain mental peace but did not had anything to reduce the abuse. Although tried to keep quiet more in order to maintain good relation.

**Participant C:** In her view her job was her strategy to cope with the situation and this provided her escape from her mental tensions and tense marital relation. As she quoted:

*“My job gave me a good option to escape and also earn”*

**Participant F:** In her views her job diverted her attention from these routine trifles and provided her respite to focus on children and also avoid her husband. That worked as a good strategy. She quoted:

*“My job helped me to face him less and involve in quarrels a bit less”*

Theme	Category	Codes
Compromising relation	Relationship issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not a normal relation</li> <li>• maintain good home environment</li> <li>• A passing time relationship</li> <li>• Adaptation to the situation</li> </ul>
	Abusive relative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal/physical/ emotional abuse</li> <li>• House hold chores couldn't be done perfectly</li> <li>• Insult and humiliation were routine</li> </ul>
Mental agony		

	Bitter experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Painful experience of life</li> <li>• Shattered dreams and self-pity</li> <li>• Feeling of helplessness &amp; stress</li> </ul>
<b>Catharsis</b>	Respite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source of relief</li> <li>• Sharing provides peace</li> <li>• Matter dealt within house</li> </ul>
<b>Women Empowerment</b>	Women emancipation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial independence</li> <li>• No time to think about abuse</li> <li>• Decision makers                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Social stigmas ceased to reveal the truth</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Social pressures</b>	Patriarchal system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Family honor</li> <li>▪ Reconciliation</li> <li>▪ Lack of family support</li> </ul>
<b>Religion a source of courage</b>	spirituality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mental peace in religion</li> <li>▪ Relaxation through prayer</li> </ul>
<b>Raise Voices</b>	Rights and support bequeathed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Women's decisions</li> <li>▪ Family support</li> </ul>

**Theme 1: Compromised relation.** The element of dissatisfaction and lack of affection was vividly seen. The phrases like “no option left”, “not a normal relation”, “time pass relation” elucidated well the weak and fragile bond of husband and wife. The disturbed relation made women stressed and put them in the situation of compromise for the children and themselves as mentioned by a respondent “have to compromise for kids”. The insensitive behavior of husband made wife more distressed and she accepted the situation as her fate as no other choice is left for her. While one respondent said simultaneously “life is brutal” which depicted how bad she felt in that compromising relationship and longing for a respectable and affectionate marital relationship.

**Theme 2: Mental agony.** In this cluster respondents described their mental distress which disturbed their routine lives as well. As respondent B quoted “Verbal abuse was his hobby” which not only perturbed her physically but also emotionally. The use of words “hobby”, “routine” represented the intensity of the violence that was common and inflicted mental pain. She always tried to do everything perfectly so that she may not invite the anger of her husband. She was extremely scared of her husband's mood and anger. Similarly, another respondent C, used the word “pressurized” to tell that she was unable to pay attention to her daily routine. The respondent E told about “insult” and “humiliation” of disrespectful behavior of her husband in front of everyone. As she quoted the phrase “Like I am not a human” exhibits her true mental stress and trauma. Frequent insult and violence had shattered their personalities and inculcated the trait of fright in them. The element of helplessness was quite evident which indicated the problematic relationship. The phrases like “what should I do”, “what is my fault”, and “what should I tell” clearly show their bitter experiences of marital life which ruined their dreams and caused a never-ending pain to them. As respondent F, told about a nice happy family life, her dreams were completely shattered. Another respondent D, told about her expectations from her marriage and husband and she found everything completely change.

**Theme 3: Social pressures.** The rule of patriarchy and family honor attached to women, stopped them from revealing the truth of their marital life to the family and friends. As respondent C quoted, “it might be hasty decision to tell in the start to the family” as family never support this. Similarly, A, B, D quoted the words, *hasty, very early, start of a relation, family honor*, to describe that it was too early to reveal and the reaction of family and society. As society is male chauvinistic which would never support woman's stance. As mentioned by a respondent;

“Men get clean chit” and another respondent quoted “we are carriers of our family's respect”. This depicted that they did not revealed their situation to their family as they are the protectors of family honor and society response would be negative.

**Theme 4: Catharsis:** By discussing with family and friend provided a sense of relief top the respondents. As respondent A quoted: “I felt a burden is uplifted”. She didn't tell about this to her

family but after few years when she realized that things were out of control and she was not be able to tolerate more she discussed with family and felt relaxed.

The other respondent D quoted: *"I was relieved by sharing, previously I felt myself in constant pressure"*. By sharing respondents felt calmed. Stress on them had been vanished as they thought constant hiding the truth from family was also making them distressed. As quoted by respondent F years old: *"I got the moral support which was much needed at that time"*. The family support gave benefit to the respondent in terms of relaxation and stress release.

**Theme 5: Women Empowerment:** The respondents used the spontaneously used word *"job"* when asked about their strategy to cope with the situation. Participant A quoted: *"I started my small business of dry fruits in this way I had less interaction with him which lessened his abuse and also I was earning myself"*. She thought got busy in her business proved good for her. She did not think much on abuse and marital relation (her husband was not fulfilling her conjugal rights). Her focus was her earning and kids. Respondents C and E years old also thought the job was a good option for them as they used the words *"escape"*, *"face him less"*, *"earn"* which indicated that their financial empowerment put them in a better condition.

**Theme 6: Religion a source of courage.** Religion was the source of hope and comfort for some respondents. The promptly used words were, *"peace"*, *"prayer"*, and *"relaxation"*. As the respondent said: *"I cry and offer prayer as it was the only way to achieve comfort"*. Another said: *"Allah could only help me"*. Religion was taken as a way of comfort and maintaining internal peace by the women who did not find another way out. It was their only coping strategy to fight with the circumstances. As respondent B said: *"I pray to Allah to change him and I have connection with Allah only"*. Prayer was taken as a way of salvation by these women.

**Theme 7: Raise your voice:** All the participant shared the unanimous view regarding domestic abuse to raise the voice against it as quoted words were, *"don't tolerate"*, *"tell your parents"*, *"seek help"*, *"life is one time"*. The respondent C years, was against hiding and telling the family earlier about marital relationship. Similarly, respondent B, said women are educated so they should take decisions. She repented that she bore so much. While respondent F, quoted: *"Man cannot change his nature so woman should not tolerate that abuse"*. Respondents thought that help seeking is a better option rather than tolerating and living in that abusive relation. Woman must take her own decisions as respondents used words like *"her right"*, *"her decision"*, *"educated women"*, *"earning"* exhibit that women did not like to tolerate the abuse and emotional and physical distress. It was also viewed that government should play role in making reforms in legal and health system so that women could be supported well. As the provision of services was the primary responsibility of the government so the respondents also believed that government was lagging behind in this due to which women victims were suffering.

## DISCUSSION

In this study women who were domestically abused by their husbands elucidated their lived experiences and the way they cope with the situation. They explained their own traumas, feeling and conditions. The finding of the current study is aligned with those found by Dunham and Senn (2000), which stated that women in abusive relation conceal the reality of the relation from family and friends. The in turn prolong this abuse and ultimately woman become habitual to bear the abuse and man become habitual to suppress her more.. A study reported the same reasons for not disclosing the truth of their relation as described by Bagshaw, (2008), that women hide the abuse due to the threat to her own life, honor and fear of losing her children.

These women had the concept embedded in their minds that they carry family honor so, they tried their best to compromise in the abusive relation. And when they felt distressed, few of them seek relief in the religion. Namaz and Holy Quran was a source of relief and calmness for them. Religion is taken as one of the sources to get relief from the tyranny of life. It is lined with the research by Wallington & Murphy, (2006), which identify the coping strategies used by abused women, which occurred through religious framing and following religious commandants. A study by Hayati, et. al., (2013), reported the similar coping strategies religion a source of solace by respondents as the present study described. They indicated that women found religion as respite and an escape from the abuse for the time being which provide them satisfaction and mental peace. In their study, religious association as well as positive diversion of the self were among coping strategies indicated by women in Indonesia. Some of the respondent thought that getting busy in the jobs or activity was one of the escapes from

confronting their spouse and saving their selves from turbulent situation. Job was a source of relaxation to them. Moreover, it was something which provided financial stability and strength. As all the respondent either explicitly or tacitly agreed upon the financial independence of the women. As Heidi et. al., (2000), explained that domestic violence is rooted in the interpersonal injustice within the family and society continued subjugation of women. It also reflected that few of the women adopted work as their coping strategy which highlighted the enlightenment of the women of our society despite of patriarchal control and hegemony.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is now possible to state that the lived experiences of domestically abused women included a compromised marital relation, mental agony, social stigmas, and lack of empowerment which eventually had adverse effect on their lives. The second major finding was that they had limited coping strategies to domestic abuse like religious framework and employment to gain relief. The study indicated that social pressures and family honor make women quiet as they know they are in disadvantageous position and safeguarding their martial life is the only solution for them.

## **Way forward**

The findings from the research should be communicate to ministry of women development Pakistan for pro women policy making. The laws about women protection must also be part of the academic's curriculum. Advocacy and behavioral change campaigns should be initiated for community awareness. Media must also exhibit its power and worth in providing awareness about the laws and psychological health.

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