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Recommended Citation

Farooq, S., Ali, T. S., Parpio, Y., Lalani, N., Marjorie, M. (2017). Why women suffer domestic violence in silence: Web-based responses to a blog. *Nursing Practice Today*, 4(4), 203-211.

Available at: https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_son/482

Original Article

Why women suffer domestic violence in silence: Web-based responses to a blog

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ARTICLE INFO

Received 10 June 2017
Revised 30 July 2017
Accepted 21 October 2017
ePublished 22 October 2017
Published 7 November 2017

Available online at:
<http://npt.tums.ac.ir>

Key words:

domestic violence,
women,
web-based blog discussion,
traditional values,
legal insinuations,
patriarchal behavior

ABSTRACT

Background & Aim: Domestic violence (DV) is a global socio-cultural concern faced by a majority of women. DV has a negative impact on women's social, physical, and psychological wellbeing. Objective was to explore perceptions regarding contributing factors to domestic violence among women.

Methods & Materials: A qualitative descriptive exploratory method was applied for the study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants through emails to respond to the web based blog created for the study. 41 worldwide participants shared their perceptions through the blogs in the study. The data were collected using a web-based discussion forum on the Urban Women Health Collaborative (UWHC), an internet-based social networking site, during March 2011. Data were analyzed, and categories and themes were extracted using a content analysis approach.

Results: The major theme "Traditional values justifying domestic violence against women" emerged from the analysis of the participants' blog. Under this major theme, four categories were extracted which include: socio-cultural attitudes towards women; trapped in the vicious cycle of violence; DV is a power game; and the misinterpretation of legal insinuations and religious practices.

Conclusion: Women face DV due to social cultural practices and inequities in society. This implies that effective interventions are needed at several levels: individual, family, and community to prevent the violence and to provide a safe and respectful environment for the women in the society.

Introduction

Domestic Violence (DV) against women is a sensitive socio-cultural issue (1, 2) and leading cause of concern worldwide (3). DV is classified as violent behavior committed by family members, especially by a partner (4). Women face DV regardless of their educational level, ethnic origin, religion, class, gender, and age (5). Domestic violence against women is generally viewed as a result of gender inequality and unequal balance of power. Men who perpetrate violence against their partners generally

demonstrate their authoritative power and position as the head of the family as well as to control their partners. (6)

Gender inequality is a global concern which is widely observed in many Asian cultures (3, 7). Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, and Zxi (2002) suggested that a majority of societies might accept violence as a normal behavior which implies that social norms and values play a significant role in justifying DV against women. Women tend to consider their exposure to DV a part of everyday life (8, 9), thereby passively allowing male perpetrators to continue violent behavior (2).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 10 to 69% of women

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suffer from DV worldwide (9). Past literature found that DV was considered a private matter among Pakistani women (1, 9). Exceeding WHO estimates, 70 to 90 % Pakistani women suffer from DV (9, 10). Common risk factors for DV include woman's age, educational level, the number of children, husband's level of education, gender inequality, childhood experience of violence, and acceptance of violence (8, 11, 12). DV has been shown to have negative consequences for a women's physical, reproductive, social, and mental health (11).

The present research appears to be the first web-based study in which participants from both developed and developing countries posted their views about DV on a social networking site. The aim of this study was to explore the factors which contribute to women's silence about DV.

Methods

The study employed a descriptive exploratory qualitative design. In order to study factors associated with DV and collect data, a blog was created by the primary author on the Urban Women's Health Collaborative site (UWHC). The primary purpose of this study was to create a web discussion blog to promote in advocating for women's health and hence, it does not require review for human subjects' protection. The project adhered to all the ethical implications that included explanation and purpose of web blog discussion to participants and it established a dialogue about the contemporary issue that women faces in cities that impact their health and life experience. Therefore, invitees who registered on the website to the blog were considered to be volunteer participants.

Purposive sampling was used to invite potential participants through their email and Facebook. The participants who could

write and understand English language and had access to the internet were enrolled in the study. On the blog volunteer participants were asked to reflect on their views regarding factors contributing to DV. Of the 41 respondents shared their views on the blog over a period of one month. Total respondents, 32 (80%) were Pakistani women. Data analysis was conducted using the five-step approach by Creswell (13). Inductive coding was used to analyze the data using latent and manifest content analysis techniques. The discussion threads were read several times for in-depth understanding. Each blog was read carefully and all the important ideas, words, and phrases that were relevant to the factors of DV were highlighted and given a code. Similar codes, having the same meaning, were merged together to form subcategories, that were analyzed for similarities and connections for the construction of common categories. Finally, a theme was identified representing the latent (underlying) meaning of the data. Regular correspondence was conducted through the discussion of the blog to re-evaluate codes for similarities and differences. Furthermore, data were analyzed by a diverse team of experts in qualitative research in order to maintain trustworthiness of study.

Results

In this study, out of 41 respondents 39 (95%) were female. Majority of the participants were healthcare professionals. Content Analysis was done and several themes were formulated based on several subcategories and categories. The major theme that emerged from the content analysis was: Traditional values justifying domestic violence against women. Under this theme, four categories were identified with several subcategories. The major categories included: socio-cultural attitudes towards women; trapped in the vicious cycle

of violence; DV is a power game and misinterpretation of legal insinuations and religious practices. (See Table1).

Core Theme: Traditional values justifying domestic violence against women.

The data from the blog scripts revealed that domestic violence is a widely accepted phenomenon in society, viewed as people's mindset, cultural norm, and learned behavior. One of the participants expressed opinions like the following:

“The society and community people have a mindset that a woman has to sacrifice and compromise at every instance” (ID no. 31)

“The cultural norms of our society do not let them [women] to raise voices [against domestic violence] so they have to bear the cost of suffering” (ID no. 40).

“Male dominated culture may abuse women but that is again a cultural issue and a mind frame” (ID no. 09).

In our study, the main theme emerged from four categories: Socio-cultural attitudes towards women; trapped in vicious cycle of violence; power game; and misinterpretation of legal and religious practices. These categories will be discussed in detail.

Category 1- Socio-Cultural Attitudes towards women

It was a common perception among most of the participants that domestic violence is caused by societal attitudes. According to the informants, society expects women to sacrifice their interests for others. They are expected to compromise, even their basic needs for others. Even educated and economically empowered women are constrained to yield to social mindsets, in spite of their suffering from DV due to culturally-dictated practices.

Some participants voiced such reports as follow:

“Culturally Pakistani women have accepted male dominance. A feeling of helplessness prevails among the women in

the whole society which resists in any efforts to protect women” (ID no. 11).

“I always wonder that in our society, what is that which makes men superior to women?”

(ID no. 02).

Sub-category I: Culture of Silence

Our findings revealed that women suffered silently and did not disclose abusive acts even in their family or among their friends. Instead, they saw their role as maintaining the family honor and respect. Women preferred to be quiet and silent about DV issues as part of their upbringing.

Two of the respondents mentioned that “Women do not report abuse and violence, it is not mentioned openly because it is still considered a "dirty secret" that remains in the family so the woman continues to suffer”

(ID no. 09 & 21).

Moreover, fear of getting a divorce and [because of it] separation from their children made her extremely vulnerable to violence. Besides, it was also reported that the victim's parents typically asked her to silently and obediently tolerate violence to protect her family's honor and prestige. It is also found that women were so much engaged in their family and household responsibilities that they are forced to ignore their own rights. Women submissively suffered from all sorts of male abusive behaviors as there is a mindset among the women that nobody including her own parents is going to rescue and support them in such situations. Most importantly, the fear that her children's food, shelter, love, safety, and protection would be lost due to a break up from her husband also compelled her to stay silent.

Participants wrote that many women tended to prioritize their children's safety and future needs over their own respect and dignity and thus, tolerated all kinds of abuse

and violence from their husbands and in-laws in silence.

“Women do not take a stand as they fear about their children’s future. {They know that if they spoke up, their] respect in society would be lost as the society would blame her for not facing [the abuse] silently” (ID no. 28).

“Moreover fear of getting divorce and social stigma keeps women from not asking for their rights”

(ID no. 16).

“The reason a woman continues to bear abuse in her house could be because she may feel she does not have any other option, or the alternatives available may seem equally bad if not worse”

(ID no. 08).

Sub-category I: Women is suffering regardless of their education and economic empowerment

As mentioned above, a significant finding highlighted by participants was that in today’s modern society, even educated and financially autonomous women act submissive and tolerate DV. Women tend to hide their spouse’s abuse, either physical or mental, to maintain her own respect and image in society. Despite being educated and self-sufficient, they often felt helpless and were deprived of their right to liberty and power of voice due to various socio-cultural reasons.

Another participant expressed that:

“Nowadays women are getting educated but the power of voice still remains a question for them. Men fear to lose their own power and therefore do not allow women to voice out their concerns. To keep their control and superiority, men abuse women (verbally, physically, and sexually). Women having no choice act subservient and do not speak for their rights”

(ID no. 32).

Sub-category I: Male Dominant Society

A majority of the participants believed that a male dominant society often results in the oppression of women. In societies where there is a strong cultural practice to suppress women; men often prefer to marry an uneducated woman who will not raise her voice against the patriarchal behavior. In some societies, it is also culturally acceptable for a husband to beat his wife openly. On the other hand, if a wife beats her husband, she is penalized, loses her social respect, and is labeled as a bad woman by society. In fact, it is usually presumed that a strong man is one who is physically aggressive towards his wife or who tries to control her behavior.

Some illustrative quotations from the blog follow.

“Where I come from, it is an abomination for a wife to beat up her husband and she is liable to pay a fine if caught doing so. But it is okay for a man to beat up his wife for little or no reason.” (ID no. 07).

“I found that in most of the places, there is no respect of women as a mother, sister, daughter and wife rather these people are misusing the women” (ID no. 27).

“Culturally Pakistani women have accepted male dominance and a feeling of helplessness”.

(ID no. 11).

“I always wonder that in our society, what is that which makes men superior to women?”

(ID no. 02)

“When I was very young I used to ask God...Oh, Allah why I am not a boy? The reason behind this was only freedom; freedom to think, freedom to dream, freedom to go, freedom to ask, freedom to behave etc...” (ID no. 05)

Category II: Trapped into Vicious cycle of violence

Sub-category II - Learned Behavior

Informants voiced that violence is a socially learned behavior. Parents are the role models for their kids. In a family where males grow up seeing their father commit violence against their mother, the sons are more prone to continue the same practice with their wives.

One participant voiced that “Monkey see, Monkey Do” Son sees father beat mom, he is going to beat his wife”. (ID no. 09)

Category III: DV is a power game

Sub Category III-Power game by men over women or between women

Informants wrote that DV is a way to exercise power and control women. In many cases, the abused woman’s mother-in-law and sister-in-law were observed to be involved in DV. DV can be explained as a power game that could be between a man and a woman, and even two women. For instance, it is often observed that the dominant women of the family, like the mother-in-law and sister-in-law, make life miserable for the woman who moved into their family upon the son’s marriage, namely the daughter-in-law, either directly or indirectly (by supporting, instigating and allowing the male members of the family to abuse her).

“DV is a power game and it is not only between opposite sexes but rather between two similar sexes as well. Most of us get too excited to make our assumptions regarding

the perpetrator as men, but I think it’s not always him, many times it’s her as well (now this could be mother or sister in law or any other in-laws, who consider being more powerful in terms of resources, experiences, and support).” (ID no. 36)

Category IV: Misinterpretation of legal insinuations and religious practices

Sub-category IV - Legal insinuations

Participants voice that there is a law against DV but it is very rarely implemented for several reasons. Most of the time, the police do not register a case related to DV due to political and many times family pressures.

Some Participants shared that “Instead of existing laws and policies, domestic violence is still prevalent”.

“I would like to share with you a terrible story of 20 years old woman who was constantly beaten, abused and tortured by her husband and mother-in-law. She died a few months ago because of the unwillingness of the police to act against the case of DV” (ID no. 06).

Sub-category V - Religious misinterpretation

Most of the time, DV in Pakistan is perpetrated in the name of religion due to misinterpretations of the religion.

“In Pakistan too, there are strong misconceptions related to domestic violence, that Islam allows the husband to beat his wife” (ID no. 07).

Table 1. Theme: Traditional values justifying domestic violence against women

| Categories | Sub –Categories |
|--|--|
| I. Socio-cultural attitudes towards women | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Culture of Silence ◆ Women is suffering regardless of their education and economic empowerment ◆ Male dominant society |
| II. Trapped into vicious cycle of violence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Learned behavior |
| III. DV is a power game | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Power game by men over women ◆ Power game between women |
| IV. Misinterpretation of legal insinuations and religious practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Cases are not registered as they are considered family matters ◆ Men misusing religion to commit violence against women |

Discussion

In this study, participants from ten different developed and developing countries shared their views on factors contributing to domestic violence via blogs. Of these, 32 were educated, English-speaking Pakistani women. In the study factors leading to domestic violence were explored and a major theme identified: 'Traditional values justifying domestic violence against women. The study revealed that women reported having been discriminated and oppressed at all levels, home, and society, and on both religious and legal grounds. Our study also identified that cultural and religious norms constrained women to accept and tolerate violence from their husbands and family. Other researchers also have reported that Pakistani society understands domestic violence against women as a normal phenomenon. (10, 12, 14-16)

Participants also expressed that a culture of silence among women served as a major contributor to domestic violence and thus made it easier for perpetrators to continue their violent attitudes and behavior. Similar findings have been reported by other studies (7, 17-19). Fear of divorce, feeling of shame, lack of a support system, fear for their children's safety and protection, and responsibilities as a good woman to exemplify family honor are several reasons that had led women to suffer DV in silence in Pakistan.

Our study findings show that well educated Pakistani women faced gender discrimination that restricted satisfaction of their basic needs and rights, including access to food, education and autonomy. In addition, it was common for boys' needs to be prioritized over girls' needs. Similar findings were reported in Kaur & Garg's (2010) study which found that domestic violence is rooted in real or perceived

gender inequality. A study in Karachi, Pakistan by Ali et al. (2011) reported that society sanctioned women's subordinate role to men. Evidence for this includes that women had fewer socioeconomic resources with which to exercise their rights and power, thereby contributing to propensities for experiencing domestic violence (9, 12, 20).

Our study also found that the experience of DV was uniform irrespective of women's educational status and degree of economic independence. Research in North India by Khosla, Dua, Devi & Sud, (2005) also found that economic independence did not shelter women from DV. A plausible explanation for this could be that when women become economically independent, their husbands felt insecure they lost power so tried to regain it by practicing violence. However, studies conducted in rural Bangladesh and Pakistan reported that education was protective against DV (21, 22).

The vicious cycle of violence has long been considered a key factor for the perpetration of violence (23). When a child witnesses the abuse of his mother; he or she perceives violence as normal behavior in punishment and conflict situations, and is likely to exercise this attitude and behavior with their spouses (7, 16, 24, 25).

DV is a power game, which is practiced by any gender to gain control. Mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, as well as men, were identified as significant perpetrators of domestic violence against women: they held the power to make household decisions and overall decisions pertaining to women rights and basic needs. Similar studies where power is exercised by women against women have been reported for Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. (3, 15, 26).

In our study, religious misinterpretation was also identified as the key underlying reason for DV. Our findings are consistent with those of other studies (7, 27, 28). From

their study in Karachi, Ali et al., (2011, 2012) highlighted that religious misconception reinforced the suppression of women's rights. Similarly, other studies conducted among Muslim men and women in Pakistan reported that violence against women was justified in the name of Islam (27, 28). However, in Islam, domestic violence is prohibited in the Holy Quran as it says "And live with them with kindness and equity" (4:19) (27). The Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) also advised Muslims in Hadith that "the best among you is one who is best towards his wife" (16). Fikree et al.'s, (2005) study in Karachi, Pakistan, reported that men perceived that they had a "right" to perpetrate violence against their wives. Furthermore, law enforcement authority, especially in Pakistan, reinforces domestic violence by considering it as a private affair and family matter (10) and hence, they refuse to register and intervene in such cases. Similar findings have also been affirmed by other research studies (7, 9).

There were several limitations of the study. Only participants who had access to the internet participated in this study and the majority of them were female. There is a possibility that respondents may have provided selected or socially desirable information as the data was collected using the social media.

Despite these limitations, we believe that this study generates a deeper understanding of the social-cultural factors contributing towards DV among women in Pakistan. This study was one of its first kind to be carried out using web-based blog discussions and derived from participants from ten different countries worldwide. DV is a major concern globally and therefore, a contextual understanding of the phenomena can lead to several actions against this practice among women. Actions should be taken at all levels, individual, family, and

community to combat such harmful practices in the society while keeping in mind the traditional values.

On the basis of this study, we conclude that women are facing DV due to social-cultural customs, practices and inequities. To improve women's general health and reduce violence inflicted on women, action against such inequalities needs to be taken at all levels including the individual, family and community levels. Poor women should be sensitized about their subordinate position to be able to act to gain more equal status with men in society. Education needs to be available for both men and women. Awareness needs to be created among both men and women through media and other sources. Mass media has an important role to curb this suffering at family and societal levels. International organizations need to participate in the women empowerment.

Acknowledgments

We are thankful to:

- ◆ The Rockefeller Foundation for providing financial support for the development and conduct of the Urban Women's Health Collaborative (UWHC), as well as for the 12 Rockefeller- Penn Fellows, of whom the lead author was one.
- ◆ The University of Pennsylvania's Institute for Urban Research and School of Nursing which proposed the UWHC. The Penn School of Nursing implemented the UWHC, and recruited and mentored the Rockefeller-Penn Fellows.
- ◆ The Rockefeller-Penn Fellows, who were from countries of Africa, America, Asia, and Europe, led the population of the content of the UWHC 2010-11.

All participants in the UWHC participated in blog discussion on DV

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this study declare no conflicts of interest.

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