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Psychological Impacts on Victims of Domestic Violence: A Qualitative Approach

Mariny Abdul Ghani, Sabasiah Husin, Nadiyah Elias and Adilah Mohd. Zain

¹Psychology and Counseling Program, School of Social Development, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Very little is known about the actual living experiences of Malaysian women who are in a domestic violence relationship. The study attempts to redress this shortfall by listening to the women's stories and understanding their home-life situations. A series of qualitative interviews was employed to explore the abused women's accounts in relation to domestic violence impact particularly in the matter of their psychological well-being. Twenty-five women who identified themselves as victims and survivors of domestic violence perpetrated by their husbands/ex-husbands have been recruited as participants in the study. Taken together, eleven interviews had been conducted with the professionals in related organizations such as counselors and social workers. Via the analysis of thematic, four major themes were identified to be the psychological impact of domestic violence, as described by the participants. The findings include traumatic expressions, feelings of disgrace, nightmare occurrences and also thought of being ineffective as parents. Indeed, the interference of cultural values as well as religious beliefs upheld by the Malaysian community was greatly associated with its occurrence. Thus, the study highlights the value of qualitative research that provides an opportunity for these women to express their feelings as well as sharing personal stories with the purpose of making other people better understand the psychological consequences of domestic violence in relation to the abused women's mental health well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence problem has been identified as occurring across all religions, ethnicities, cultures, ages and economic status (Pyles, L. and J.L. Postmus, 2004). Despite a large number of studies having been conducted around the globe focusing on these abusive relationships, knowledge about abused women's experiences is lacking. Notably, the impact of such victimization experiences may have adverse consequences not only for the victims, but their children, families, friends as well as the whole of society.

The problem is often described as a family-centered problem and generally understood as patterns of abusive and coercive behavior which may cause physical injuries, psychological and emotional disturbances, sexual intimidation as well as financial oppression of the victim.

In fact, it is portrayed as the act of maltreatment of one's partner by the other in the context of an intimate relationship. A similar definition, described by (Healey, K., *et al.*, 1998), is that acts of violence and abusive behaviors are used by adults to control and dominate their intimate partners, and is thus classified as domestic violence. The World Health Organizations (WHO) defines violence in the following way:

"Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation" (WHO), 2009.

There are a few key words which similarly describe the term violence in an intimate relationship. The majority of the terms have been used interchangeably by women's advocates, domestic violence educators and service provider for instance marital violence, spousal abuse, intimate partner violence and women battering. Some of these terms have a gender-specific connotation, for example 'wife abuse' and some of them are referring to non-marital relationships such as 'dating violence'.

Review of the literature shows there were studies that investigated the impacts of domestic violence on the psychological and emotional aspects of health (El-Bassel, N., *et al.*, Jarvis, K.L., *et al.*, 2005; Che Din, N., *et al.*, 2010; Kumar, S., *et al.*, 2005; Crawford, E., *et al.*, 2009; Sarkar, M., 2010). As example, a number of recent

Corresponding Author: Mariny Abdul Ghani, Psychology and Counseling Program, School of Social Development, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Tel: +604 928 5767, Fax: +604 928 5757, E-mail: mariny@uum.edu.my

studies have reported the effects of mental health problems including anxiety disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as suicidal thoughts and attempts (Dorahy, M.J., *et al.*, 2007; Phillips, K.E., *et al.*, 2006; Hill, T.D., *et al.*, 2007).

Dorahy and colleagues analyzed the data from 33 women victims of domestic violence together with 33 non-abused women in Northern Ireland and concluded that women from comparison group reported less psychological distress than the abused women sample. The study also found that many of the women in the domestic violence sample had experienced child abuse in their earlier lives compared to the women from the general population.

This finding is supported by the study of Pilar Matud who examined the psychological impact of partner violence on Spanish women (Pilar Matud, M., 2005). Both studies identified similarities regarding abused women samples in terms of the women's severe depression and anxiety levels. Based on a survey of more than 450 women (i.e. abused and non-abused), Pilar Matud's conclusions would have been much more original had the author had adopted a number of qualitative interviews with the women. This in order to explain further their personal violence experiences particularly in regard to their psychological health.

Methods:

This was an exploratory study as well as narrative in nature. A qualitative methodology was employed in order to obtain new insights into Malaysian women's psychological experiences of living in abusive relationships. Nonetheless, owing to various issues such as sensitivities, contextual framework as well as a number of practical constraints that lay in the study, ethical and safety issues were considered paramount.

The most important ethical considerations for this type of study are confidentiality and anonymity. Thus, participation was entirely voluntary with confidential assurance for the women's participants. A Participant Information Sheet was used to explain the requirements of the research whereas Informed Consent Form confirmed the participant's voluntarily involvement in the study. Prior to any interview conducted, every participant was asked for permission for the conversation to be audio-taped.

Semi-structured interview was used as a key method in the study because it provides in depth qualitative data and believed to be appropriate to the nature of this vulnerable group of participants. A list of pre-coded questions also known as interview schedule was developed based on a review of the literature. In total, there were eight main categories constructed with several pre-determined questions formulated for each cluster. Nevertheless, these questions were only served as a form of framework for focusing on the topics discussed and as guidance for the interview process. Relevant changes were made as the interview progressed based on the participant's responses.

Prior to conducting the research, a procedural pilot study was undertaken with the idea of research simulation as well as to validate the questions in the interview schedule. Following to the pilot study, there were little refinements in terms of wording as well as minor alterations to the pattern of the overall interview schedule had been made in order to enhance the feasibility of the main study.

In the data analysis stage, identification of the participants in the interview transcripts would occur by use of pseudonyms and all information given during the interviews were treated as strictly confidential materials and were stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (Data Collection & Storage). The appropriate support systems, for instance counseling services, were made available to the participants, in line with the suggestion by Ellsberg and Heise in their research. As they stated:

"As a minimum standard, researchers have an ethical obligation to provide respondents with information or services that can respond to their situations" (Ellsberg, M. and L. Heise, 2002).

Therefore, participants were encouraged to discuss any possible causes of distress or concern that arose during the course of the interview or aftermath. In return, those issues were guaranteed to be dealt with appropriate manner and with complete privacy. During the interviews, no situations arose where mandatory referral for additional support was required. As well, none of the participants had expressed any concerns during or after the interviews (reported during post-interview calls made by the researchers).

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis is used for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (usually known as themes) within qualitative data (Sarkar, M., 2010; Dorahy, M.J., *et al.*, 2007). As Braun and Clarke state:

"The thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Lyons, E., and A. Coyle, 2008).

There are two levels of analysis in this thematic method; firstly there is the semantic or explicit level and secondly, the latent or interpretive level (Rubin, H.J., and I.S. Rubin, 2004). Both levels are essential in order to make a comprehensive and accurate analysis. The analyses enable researchers to identify and report respondents' experiences, thoughts and meanings as themes and sub-themes and then represent them in similar inputs called clusters. The stage for data analysis was performed by software called *NVIVO* version 8.0. This computer package assists in data management and organization while dealing with large volumes of qualitative

data.

Although 'technical' assistance was obtained via computer software, there was still a significant need for the researcher to seek meaning underlying the women's accounts together with supporting data sourced from the interview notes. Observational data includes participants' non-verbal signs, researchers' reflections and observations at the time of the interviews. The information is useful to generate in-depth descriptions and thorough analysis of the data.

Results:

Abused women who participated in this study talked about how the violence experience affected them not only in physical term but also emotionally and psychologically. The findings showed that majority of the women perceived the psychological impacts as:

1. Traumatized expressions
2. Feelings of disgrace
3. Recurring nightmare episodes
4. Issues in parenting

For many of the women, it was a long period of time that they tried to endure their husband's abuse. More than half of the women interviewed admitted to facing a great deal of stressful experiences and feeling depressed following years living in the abusive relationship. It is believed that emotional disturbance is greatly associated with the exposure of domestic violence. For example Junaidah claimed that,

"I feel abused... my dignity as a woman has been badly affected. I am extremely sad and angry when I think about it. This feeling will not easily subside. I probably will, just before I die. I will always remember it until the day I go. I have been suffering for many years... he abused me. It will always remain in my memory... even though he is no longer here. I am so stressed. I am traumatized when I hear someone shout". (Junaidah)

Joyah also accounted how the abusive relationship has impacted her. The excerpt reflects that she was severely disturbed by the past experiences. It has been years but Joyah is still psychologically traumatized and associated other violence incidents to her own experience. In Joyah's excerpt, she said:

"I was traumatized by the violent incidents. I can't bear to see any man beating up his wife, even if it is in a television drama or in a movie. I can't stand it. I screamed hysterically to the extent that my son switched the television off because of my reactions. I still can't manage to forget things in the past. I was so terrified. If I encountered situations where people are yelling angrily, my body started shaking as like they will come to me and beat me up. Yes, to that extent". (Joyah)

Two respondents described similar experiences. In the words of Halimah and Rizzi:

"I also felt disappointed. I was angry and frustrated. At one time, I felt like I've lost my mind... I felt like scalding him with hot water. I prayed to Allah to strengthen my iman. It was in the middle of the night after he hit me. I was feeling extremely upset. I stared looking at the hot water... I wanted to pour it on to him while he was asleep. But I just let him be asleep. The thought came across my mind, what if I really did it. What if he dies...What is going to happen to me and my children? I decided not to do it". (Halimah)

"He has been abusing me since early years of our marriage...he even accused me of having an affair with another man until he chased me out of the house. I was so heart-broken...I was so devastated. The scar is still there. I am so traumatized. I have no one else in my life other than him. I am sad for what he did to me and for my children". (Rizi)

Referring to the psychological consequences, Izhan and Halimah also added:

I always see him in my dreams. In those dreams, I was with him....he tried to do something bad to me. It was like real. He punched me on the face, pulled my hair. Just like when we were still together. I am so afraid of him. When I woke up, I wondered to myself.....why would I have such dream of him?" (Izhan)

"At times I am having nightmares when I sleep. I dreamt that he chased me...he wants to beat me again. That's what always happened in my dream. I don't know...but that's how. Some of my friends suggested that I see a shaman for a cure". (Halimah)

Additionally, some of the women claimed that they sometimes lose control of their emotional feelings towards the children as the tension piles up. The following excerpts from Ain, Ikin, Zawiyah and Rita stated:

"Whenever I got into a fight with my husband and kept the anger inside me, I ended up scolding my children. I cursed them. I know I shouldn't do that, but I lost control of myself whenever I got frustrated by him. I simply can't control myself. I later apologised to them". (Ain)

"There have been many occasions whereby I've vented my anger on my children. Sometimes I feel that I've abused them. I've hit them before. I can't stand it and I hit them". (Ikin)

"When I get so stressed out, I really don't care about my children and my grandchildren. I don't want to know. I was never like this before". (Zawiyah)

"It has been a routine for my children and me to get caught up in fights. My children are aware of my bad moods after I get into a fight with my husband. Sometimes I take it on them to let go of my anger". (Rita)

The corresponding ideas of domestic violence impacts were also shared by the professionals (the organizations who work with domestic violence victims/survivors) in the study, as described in the following quotes:

"Mental stress experienced by wives would be the main effect of domestic violence. Continuous mental abuse could cause depression and sometimes it could go beyond control such as suicide or similar". (Mrs. Ros, the counselor)

"We have cases where the woman was badly beaten and hospitalized. Every time she saw the husband, she's shivering because even though she tried to escape many times, the husband still knows where to find her. So these sorts of cases are emotional abuse and become mental problem when they are too depressed". (Miss Ann, the social worker)

"From my experience, the victim will get traumatized. She wouldn't know what to do. We do have cases whereby the victim had reached the maximum level of stress. Whenever we have cases like these we will refer them to the psychiatrist at the nearest hospital". (Mrs. Emma, the counselor)

From the above women's experiences and the professionals' views, it is evident that living in the relationship with a violent partner has made the women psychologically traumatized as well as having developed stress-related symptoms even years after the abuse. Thus, such violent experiences have led to deterioration in the women's mental health and well-being. Additionally, those excerpts presented above also explain how spousal abuse had psychologically affected those women in the long term. The psychological and emotional impacts on abused women due to domestic violence were believed to be associated with other problems for example social isolation as well as erosion of the women's self-identity.

Discussion:

A number of participants in the study expressed a great deal of emotional disturbance and frustration as they were not only in a stressful situation due to the violent relationships, but further they also struggled with parenting at the very same time. It is interesting to note that almost all women participated in this study reported that they had been abused psychologically by their men. Some have been threatened verbally and physically, while the others experienced name calling and swearing. Another important finding was that the respondents as well as the professionals highlighted domestic violence impacts (on women) in a variety of mental health outcomes.

Similar effects have been raised in numerous other studies such as (Willig, C., 2008; Dorahy, M.J., *et al.*, 2007; Phillips, K.E., *et al.*, 2011; Pilar Matud, M., 2005; Levendosky, A.A., and S.A. Graham-Bermann, 2001). Further investigation revealed that there were high rates of major depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, 'killings' and suicidal thoughts, nightmares, as well as feelings of despair described by the women examined in this present research. These results seem to be consistent with other research conducted in Spain which found that Spanish women who were identified as abused had suffered from severe depression, anxiety and insomnia as well as somatic symptoms (for instance fatigue, weight loss and abdominal pain) compared to non-abused women (Pilar Matud, M., 2005).

In parallel, a study by Dorahy and colleagues also indicated that victims of domestic violence in a Northern Ireland sample had displayed higher levels of psychological distress as compared to non-abused women in a comparative group (Dorahy, M.J., *et al.*, 2007). This relatively good correlation between domestic violence and

mental health issues may be explained by a number of factors. Firstly, domestic violence is culturally perceived as a 'private matter' in Malaysian society. So, women are expected to keep their *hal rumah tangga* (marital affairs) within the family circle. The disclosure of such abuse may lead to shame as well as to feelings of embarrassment. Hence, these feelings and emotional reactions are suppressed and eventually may perhaps contribute to PTSD symptoms as well as depressive episodes in the women's lives.

Secondly, many of these women victims in this study were reported to be disconnected to some extent with their social networks and received less human support. Therefore, over a period of time they tended to believe that they were left alone without appropriate help. Thirdly, almost all of the women in this study were financially unviable, so the economic background may play a role in believing there is no exit from these violent relationships. Further research among a Malaysian sample is needed to elucidate the reasons for this economical factor.

Some women stressed the problems they encountered as a parent following the domestic violence situation in their relationships, particularly when they were unable to control their anger due to arguments with their partners. Several of them also responded to abuse by attacking their children verbally as well as in physical terms. The finding is in agreement with Mohr, Fantuzzo and Abdul-Kabir study where this qualitative study had showed that mothers sometimes displaced their anger onto their children when they felt angry as a result of their partner's abusive behaviours (Mohr, W.K., *et al.*, 2001).

In line with the above study, Levendosky and Graham-Berman claimed that family violence negatively impacts parenting (Levendosky, A.A., and S.A. Graham-Bermann, 2001). Also, Cooney suggests that abused women responded to their being battered by in turn hitting their children (Mohr, W.K., *et al.*, 2001). The reason for this is not clear but it may have something to do with the changes of the mother's affect and mood following violence in the home. Perhaps, the mothers felt dissatisfied with their marital conflicts (mainly with the abusive partners) and channeled their rage towards the children. However, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to all mothers who experienced domestic violence. This is an important issue for future research regarding parenting among battered women in Malaysia.

Conclusions:

This study has investigated the perspective of abused women in Malaysia pertinent to their true essence of living in domestic violence relationships. In this investigation, the aim was to assess the participants' experiences of violence particularly with reference to the psychological impacts experienced by abused women in the country. The findings of this study highlighted that the impacts of domestic violence on abused women include traumatic expressions, feelings of disgrace, nightmare occurrences and also being not effective as parents (Ellsberg, M., *et al.*, 2008; Dorahy, M.J., *et al.*, 2007; Pilar Matud, M., 2005; Dutton, M.A., *et al.*, 2003; Campbell, J., *et al.*, 2002).

Indeed, the damage wrought by this social problem extends far beyond the women themselves. Perhaps the most affected individuals, besides the women themselves, are the children who grow up in abusive homes. The exposure of children to domestic violence, stated by some authors as the 'witnessing' of the assaults, involves seeing physical injuries, broken furniture as well as overhearing arguments (Cunningham, A., and L. Baker, 2004; Mullender, A., *et al.*, 2002). Further, the literature also showed a link that existed between domestic violence and a detrimental impact on women's self-identity (Crawford, E., *et al.*, 2009; Hague, G., and A. Mullender, 2006; Pilar Matud, M., 2005).

The current findings add to a growing body of literature on the experiences of abused women in Malaysia. However, with a relatively small sample size caution must be applied, as these qualitative findings may not be transferable to the general population of domestic violence victims and survivors in the country. On a positive note, a major strength of this study is related to its data collection approach. In spite of the fact that the qualitative interview employed was a time-consuming method, the approach provides flexibility of expression for the women as well as an opportunity for further investigation for the researcher. This qualitative interview approach has produced richer data and a depth of insight into the women's experiences of violence as well as valuable viewpoints obtained from for the discussions with the professionals who work with domestic violence victims/survivors in Malaysia.

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