



Interpreting Gender Norms Concerning Domestic Violence among Female University Students in Pakistan

Subham¹, Aiza Javaid², Ulfat Nisa³

1. Department of Psychology, National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan (Corresponding Author), numl-isb-f25-12474@numls.edu.pk
2. Department of Psychology, National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan aizajavid0654@gmail.com
3. Department of Psychology, National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan ulfat.nisa@numl.edu.pk

Abstract

The current study geared towards investigating how gender norms are comprehended by Pakistani Female University students, using a constructivist qualitative framework. We scrutinized the broader inequalities mirrored in personal perspectives and mundane experiences anchored in ecological and feminist perspectives. Through deep-dive interviews with 7 female university students located in Islamabad, data was collected. To ascertain pattern and themes across chronicles of participants, the thematic analysis was conducted using open coding course of action. “Gender stereotypes and supremacy”, “cognizance and resistance”, “control masked as care”, and “silent and vindication of violence” emerged as four major themes. Men were ascribed to authority and women to rearing, creating gender hierarchy which configure the appropriate behavior and practices in a relationship. Though the escalating awareness coexists with the traditional paradigms, participants frequently devised domestic violence through privacy, emotional reasoning and honor, and this sometimes abstruse harm. “The behavior and its comprehension is outlined by gender norms” and “explication of how domestic violence is acknowledged, ignored or defied” were the main implications of the study. Hereby, a substantial volume of attention not only to actions but also to the cultural meaning of those actions is imperative to tackle with violence.

Keywords: Gender norms, Domestic violence, Qualitative study, Female university students, Pakistan

Introduction

With regard to both public health and human rights, one of the grave and Substantial concerns is domestic violence against women. Approximately one in three women encounter physical or sexual violence during the course of their life and predominantly within intimate relationships, as estimated by World Health Organization (WHO, 2013; 2021). Prior studies show that heightened depression, trauma-related symptoms, and anxiety can linger over time in the women who are exposed to such violence, foregrounding the psychological consequences of domestic violence (Campbell, 2002). Gender is socially constructed and dynamic, if viewed through the lens of field of psychology and women's liberation. Recurring behavior and social norms forms the perceptions about gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990). As opposed to being neutral these Anticipations are socially and culturally embedded. Men are advocated holding more authority and women are forecasted adjusting or accommodating in such contexts (Connell, 2005). In close relationships, such disparity is more illuminated.

According to the World Health Organization: “Domestic violence is commonly defined as a pattern of behavior that includes physical, emotional, sexual, and economic forms of abuse”. So violence involves ongoing control not only the secluded incidents. (The World Health Organization, 2013). Then comes the interaction of various factors operating at multiple levels such individual, relational, community and societal levels explaining that violence is not attributed to individual level only (Heise,1998). At the same time, comes the idea of “private matter” which frame the domestic violence within the marriage especially in Pakistan leading to not only the concealment of violence but also the wrong comprehension, justification and normalization of harmful behavior (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005: Fikree & Bhatti, 1999). Dobash and Dobash (1979) repudiated that violence is accidental, claiming that it is the anticipated authority in relationships. Then comes the ambiguousness created by claiming the control and restrictiveness as a protective factor which baffle the line between the end of concern and beginning of control (Flood & Pease, 2009). Awareness and empowerment comes with education which is linked with expanded agency (Kabeer, 1999). Stromquist (2015) explain how it is turning to the amalgamation of outcomes where people so adopt new ideas but they do not let go of older beliefs creating a certain tension and making the implementation of gender equity and equality in relationships difficult. Family systems and concepts around respectability and honor closely bound these dynamics in Pakistan where women are more anticipated to be fulfilling roles that are mostly associated with obedience, care and sustaining stability of family (Ali & Gavino, 2008; Mumtaz & Salway, 2009). These presumptions are not encountered by all the women in the same way. This does not mean that all women endure these Anticipations in the same way. But within the marriage and family life, what is acceptable is shaped by such norms. Because of the normalization of such norms beliefs and Anticipations, certain behaviors that are abusive become harder to discern (Kandiyoti, 1988). For the scrutiny of the development of gender norms, a university seems to be a significant context. Staying connected to existing social anticipations, female students are more exposed to new ideas that constitute more egalitarian perspectives. In molding the views about gender and violence, how these different impacts come together still creates ambiguousness. The social anticipations that deliver a depiction for men and women on how to behave and act, are often termed as gender norms which never operates in seclusion but through every day life’s repetitive interfaces (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The gender is stable or natural, a belief created as previous researches proved that repetitive patterns of behavior create this belief (Butler, 1990). But the gender is also not rigid because certain anticipations are constantly reinforced over time. Women are not considered as independent subjects but are often positioned in reference to men and this form of relational disparity is tied to power conveying the idea of “power. de Beauvoir’s idea of woman” (Hooks, 2000). On the other hand, the idea of “hegemonic masculinity” has also been deliberated in prior studies that give an elucidation to the dominance of certain forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005). In Pakistan, family structures and social anticipations gravely determine the gender relations. Patriarchy appears less as a distinct system and more as something entrenched in daily life. Men are granted more authority in comparison to women due to decision making within the families. (Ali & Gavino, 2008; Mumtaz & Salway, 2009). Women also vindicate these norms in even in the absence of force which enhance such behaviors as women often prioritize the strength of her family upon her own worth. According to Kandiyoti (1988) this is patriarchal negotiating where women do not confront the unjust occurring against them but they themselves adjust their actions according to the constraints. But, this cannot be declared as conformity of women in doing so, but the real reason is that there is no room for other choices. Several gaps become visible across the literature. There is a dearth of focus on personal anticipations of violence as all is associated with external causes. In settings like that of Pakistan, violence is only an outcome because there is no elucidation on how people themselves interpret and make sense of it. There is no focus on the thoughts of young and educated women within socially confronted conditions. The significance of the

present study comes forward because of its aims to fill this specific gap explaining the personal comprehension of educated female students and addressing both structural and interactive levels. The current study is aimed at acknowledging this very particular context. The main objective is to explore how gender norms in relation to domestic violence are apprehended by female university students and how broader structures and personal experiences are mirrored by these apprehensions.

Methodology

In order to delve into how the female university students of Pakistan comprehend gender norms in regard with domestic violence, a qualitative research design was ratified. Rather than riveting on measurement or generalization, the concentration was on personal perspectives and the meanings the participants conferred to their experiences. The convenience sampling strategy was used for soliciting the participants. The study was conducted in universities of Islamabad. As the research explicitly aimed for the comprehension of how women themselves contemplate and interpret the gender norms within their social context, therefore, only female university students were opted. Total 7 participants with age ranging from 19 to 30 years voluntarily took part in the study. In depth-engagement with each of the participant ‘s account was preferred for more detail because the sample size was small. Hereby, the aspiration was not to representation or generalization of statistical inferences to a larger population but the insight on how participants voice out and experience these issues in a particular setting. Profound semi-structured interviews were designated to be the format for data collection as it allows to speak candidly, discourse significant issues and provide constancy throughout the responses. The divulgence of connection between the personal experiences of participants and broader cultural anticipations appended to the significance of the method of this study. Right through the study, ethical considerations were stringently followed. We apprised the participant about the intent of the study, gave them the right to withdraw, their consent was attained, did not coerced the participants for unveiling their personal experiences, considering the sensitive nature of domestic violence utmost caution was ensured.

Data Analysis

To ascertain the patterns amidst participants’ accounts while safeguarding the space for comprehension, thematic analysis was deemed right. We initiated with the transcription, then data were scrutinized thoroughly via open coding, then compared and congregated the codes on the basis of resemblances as the analysis progressed. As this methodological process was not linear therefore, some codes overlapped.

Table 01: Demographics of participants

| Participants | Age |
|--------------|-----|
| AJ | 25 |
| S | 25 |
| SK | 23 |
| GR | 24 |
| UA | 28 |
| SR | 30 |
| MA | 23 |

The repeated collate and contrast led to the development of broader categories. On the review and refinement of the categories four main themes appeared: “Gender stereotypes and supremacy”, “Cognizance and resistance”, “Control masked as care”, “Silent and vindication of violence”.

Results

This chapter focuses on the description of gender norms in relation to the domestic violence according to the female university students, portraying the findings of thematic analysis. The themes were not entirely isolated but were overlapped with each other. So to mirror how participants themselves described their experiences this overlap was retained and the boundaries were not forced explaining how gender norms are apprehended personally and socially and how it shapes behavior. Following emerged as four major themes:

Gender Stereotypes and Supremacy

Participants depicted a structured hierarchy of gender norms such as across different areas men are given more authority than women due to decision making within the families and are related to earning and decision making. Women are anticipated to endorse these norms in the name of honor, respectability and obedience even in the absence of force which enhance such behaviors as women often prioritize the stability of her family upon her own worth. There a moral periphery according to for women and deviation is considered rebellious and is judged harshly. This explains why the gender norms are supported not only by habits and actions but also the unjust beliefs systems. As one participant put it, “Mardon k liye main yehi hai k wo bahir ja k earns krein ge, dominate krein ge ghar me, thore authoritative b hon ge, mardon ki respect zyada hoti hai aurat ki nisbat, jab k aurton k liye submission pasand ki jati hai” (AJ). Another explained, “Men are anticipated to be the breadwinner and the women are anticipated to manage household chores and earn as well. Men are anticipated to make the major decisions in household” (SK). ‘respectable’ behavior ka concept bhi mostly aurton par zyada apply hota hai” (MA). Similarly, “aurat khul k bole to badchalan... mard roye to namard” (S). One participant noted, “Agr koi aurat is k against jana chahe tou us ko bht bura feel kraya jata hai.. agr respective roles k against koi jaye tou unki families b un ko judge krte hain supportive nahi hoti.” (AJ). “is ko justify krne k liye aksar mazhab ka istemal bhi kiya jata hai” (S).

Control Masked as Care

The description of some domineering behaviors such as monitoring, jealousy and restriction included some uncertainty. What confuses them is how they are framed and obscured labeled. Grilling becomes harder as the behaviors do not change but becomes subtle due to the soft labelling and then it becomes desirable. There are some emotional damages and abuse which are not even considered as an abuse. But, emotional abuse does not only have emotional or psychological consequence but it also leads to the regularization of abusive behaviors. Then the idea of managing the professional and personal life was also brought to life with a level of agitation by the participants, explaining how it becomes exhausting for a woman to manage both simultaneously. “partner par har waqt nazar rakhna ya unka phone check karna jise log aksar fikar ka naam dete hain” (GR). Another participant said, “excessive jealousy... controlling behavior... log kabhi in cheezon ko care ya love samajh lete hain” (MA). families k samne degrade krna, insult krna... psychological manipulation... log differentiate hi nahi kar pate” (AJ). In a similar way, anger was used as an explanation that softens responsibility: “gusse mein tha’ keh kar disrespect justify karna”(MA). Economic dependence appeared to deepen this imbalance. “financial dependancy ki wajah se un ko compromise b krna prta hai” (AJ). One participant referred to it as a “superwoman” burden (SK).

Silence and Vindication of Violence

Domestic violence is often esteemed as private matter so the victims don’t seek help due to shame, fear and dignity and society don’t help making it harder to apply the intervention strategies. Violence continues to persist and often the victim is blamed for the perpetrators’ actions this carries more harm because the women are empathized but still it is mixed with

scrutiny and men's actions are not taken for serious and questionable at all. Women are anticipation to withstand and men are let free which clearly portray how gender norms are filtered through Anticipations even after the damage has been done, severe enough to destroy a victim's mental, psychological and physical health. The phrase "ghar ka mamla" came up in different ways. "aam tor par violence ko personal matter samja jata hai... behind the door type" (AJ). Similarly, "log is ko ghar ka mamla keh kar ignore kar dete hain" (GR). "zaroor aurat ne hi kuch kaha hoga... mard gusse ka tez hai" (GR). Another participant said, "log kehte hain ke aurat ne hi kuch kiya hoga jis se mard ko gussa aaya" (MA). "aurat ko chahiye k chup ho jaye aur compromise kare... ghar to aese hi chalte hain" (S). At the same time, speaking about violence appears difficult. "log mostly is pe baat nahi krte... private matter samja jata hai" (AJ). "victim agr mard ho tou usko sharminda kia jata hai... wo apni aurat ko control nahi kr sakta" (AJ).

Cognizance and Resistance

With the ascending awareness and expansion of knowledge, individuals have begun to critically scrutinize the cause and consequences of violence. Mentioning education and social as the major sources insufficiency of this awareness and its consistency were also discussed. A gap still exists as what is thought and said is not followed. The existing structures and hierarchy are so strong that even though awareness exists still it is not enough to change the dynamics of violence at larger levels because of which violence still exist and still is normalized across many regions of Pakistan. "sociology field se hain... is liye hum social issues par discussions karte hain" (AJ). Another participant noted, "social media aur education ki wajah se awareness bhi zyada hui hai" (MA). "zahiri taur par tabdeeli nazar aati hai magar zehni taur par abhi bhi mard ko hi bada samjha jata hai" (UA). Similarly, "saadiyon se chala ara hai... itni jaldi nahi badalta" (S). "equality hi se relationship behtr chal sakta hai... dono discuss karen" (AJ). Another said, "healthy relationship trust, equality aur respect par based hone chahiye" (MA). All the verdicts together suggest that the domestic violence still perseveres with greater pervasiveness and not fully fixed. The little transferals like confronting violence, voicing it out is still not enough to break strong hierarchal structures or to bring a change.

Discussion

Interpretivist perspective suggested that participants were not just expressing attitudes or opinions. They were not only describing the gender relations and roles but were placing themselves within these social structures. They seemed to endorse these norms at times, questioned them at other and frequently held both opinions at the same time. According to this perspective, gender norms are not fixed rules, but emerge as interpretative frameworks that provide meaning and apprehension of relationships, authority and even violence. A recurring theme visible in participants' account was the construction of gender as a moral hierarchy. In contrast to femininity, which was connected to care-giving, obedience and perseverance, masculinity was associated with authority, economic provision and decision making. This distinction can be understood through Connell's (2005) hegemonic masculinity theory wherein certain expressions of masculinity are seen as socially legitimized and authoritative. Similarly, its Bolsters Butlers (1990) idea that repeatedly engaging in social behaviors produce gender identity. Respectability is unevenly distributed with women facing strict moral Anticipations than men. These criteria determine who was corrected, excused, or held accountable. Domineering behaviors, including monitoring, envy, and mobility limits were another important theme. These behaviors, rather than being the acts of coercion, were stereotypically perceived as care, affection or protection, suggesting that power often governs through socially acceptable forms of affection. As noted by Dobash and Dobash (1979), control is harder to discern as harmful when it is endorsed as care, which limits the resistance. There found a strong relationship between broader social norms and the silence around domestic violence. The term

ghar ka mamla (a private family affair) illustrated a socially constructed boundary that limit the violence within domestic setting. Expressions such as “zaroor aurat ne hi kuch kaha hoga” (“the woman must have said something”), positioned the victim as responsible for the violence, exemplifying victim blaming beliefs. Mumtaz and Salway (2009), together with Heise’s (1998) ecological perspective, women are anticipated to be patient, resilient, and responsible for maintaining family harmony which contribute to the stereotypicality of violence. This perception was further conflated by the participants’ reflections on victimization. Sympathy towards women was often conditional and accompanied by criticism of their behavior, but male victimization was often disesteemed or humiliated. Male frailty is difficult to discern because of the masculinity conceptions that are associated with strength and authority (Anderson, 1997).

There are some indications of change that are visible in the findings. Elevated awareness on irrational gender norms and domestic violence was reported by the participants that was influenced by education and the media. Despite that, this change remained fragmented, akin to Stromquist’s (2015) idea of fragmented empowerment, since newer opinions coexisted with long-held beliefs. Kandiyoti’s (1988) concept of patriarchal bargaining demonstrated how participants reason within these bounds, making, making confront hesitant and biased. Unlike previous research in Pakistan which largely focused on prevalence and attitudes (Ali et al., 2011; Khan et al., 2021), this study shows that domestic violence is integrated within broader interpretative frameworks, persistent not only through structural inequalities but also through the beliefs attached to gender, authority and family relationships. Moreover, participants were not just passive heritors of gender norms, they criticized as well as questioned them as they draw influences from family, religion, education and media as explained by Haj-Yahia (2003). Overall, gender norms, form relationships, validate authority, and influence how violence is acknowledged. The presence of both awareness and sustaining traditional norms suggests that awareness voluntarily cannot reduce domestic violence unless deeper moral frameworks are also addressed.

Limitations

The perspectives that were incarcerated in the research were honed down especially within the regional and cultural disparity in Pakistan because the sample size was very small and was from a single region only. The probability of enhancing the willingness and rendezvous of participants with these gender concerned discussion also elevated because of using the convenience sampling technique. Some responses may have imitated caution, socially desirable response or disquiet given the sensitivity of discussion topic as the findings depend mostly on self-narrated descriptions. Furthermore, in a changing social context perspectives are not rigid and may have altered, this variation may have failed to be captured.

Conclusions

This study examined how female university students in Pakistan understand and interpret gender norms in the context of domestic violence. The findings suggest that gender norms are deeply rooted in social and interpersonal relationships shaping anticipations of men and women in ways that reinforce uneven power relations. Domestic violence is not limited to physical harm but it is embedded within everyday interpersonal relationship dynamics. These patterns make violence less visible and more difficult to be recognized as violence. However, there are some signs of change that are visible in the findings. Now, participants have alternative perspectives on relationships that are based on equality, mutual respect and fairness. But, this shifting of perception has not completely replaced traditional gender norms. Instead, both perspectives continue to co-exist, sometimes creating conflict and contradiction. Gender norms continue to shape how society identifies and handles domestic violence. Therefore,

changing individual attitudes are not enough to address domestic violence. It requires such interventions that confront those deeper social and cultural meanings that make certain forms of control appear acceptable while making other forms of violence difficult to recognize.

References

- Abramsky, T., Watts, C. H., Garcia-Moreno, C., Devries, K., Kiss, L., Ellsberg, M., Jansen, H. A. F. M., & Heise, L. (2011). What factors are associated with recent intimate partner violence? Findings from the WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence. *BMC Public Health*, *11*, 109. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-109>
- Ali, P. A., & Gavino, M. I. B. (2008). Violence against women in Pakistan: A framework for analysis. *Journal of Pakistan Medical Association*, *58*(4), 198–203.
- Ali, T. S., & Bustamante-Gavino, I. (2007). Domestic violence in Pakistan. *Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association*, *57*(1), 1–10.
- Anderson, K. L. (1997). Gender, status, and domestic violence: An integration of feminist and family violence approaches. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *59*(3), 655–6
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Campbell, J. C. (2002). Health consequences of intimate partner violence. *The Lancet*, *359*(9314), 1331–1336. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(02\)08336-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(02)08336-8)
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage. (Original work published 1949)
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1979). *Violence against wives: A case against patriarchy*. Free Press.
- Ellsberg, M., & Heise, L. (2005). *Researching violence against women: A practical guide for researchers and activists*. World Health Organization.
- Fikree, F. F., & Bhatti, L. I. (1999). Domestic violence and health of Pakistani women. *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics*, *65*(2), 195–201.
- Flood, M., & Pease, B. (2009). Factors influencing attitudes to violence against women. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *10*(2), 125–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838009334131>
- Haj-Yahia, M. M. (2003). Beliefs about wife beating among Arab men from Israel: The influence of their patriarchal ideology. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *18*(3), 284–307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260502250206>
- Heise, L. (1998). Violence against women: An integrated, ecological framework. *Violence Against Women*, *4*(3), 262–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801298004003002>
- Heise, L., & Kotsadam, A. (2015). Cross-national and multilevel correlates of partner violence. *Social Science & Medicine*, *146*, 98–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socs.cimed.2015.02.001>
- Hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, *30*(3), 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, *2*(3), 274–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>
- World Health Organization. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women*. WHO.
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018*. WHO.
- Mumtaz, Z., & Salway, S. (2009). Understanding gendered influences on women's

- reproductive health in Pakistan. *Social Science & Medicine*, 68(7), 1349–1356.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socs.cimed.2009.01.040>
- Stromquist, N. P. (2015). Women's empowerment and education: Linking knowledge to transformative action. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41, 1–8.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedu.dev.2014.10.003>
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–151