

Spousal Violence against Women and Its Implications for Women's Mental Health

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Background

- Spousal violence against women is a major public health problem world-wide
- In addition to physical injuries and negative reproductive health consequences, SV → a myriad of mental health disorders
- MHDs constitute the second leading cause of burden of disease for 15-44 years age group
- It is the cause of largest proportion of non-fatal burden, accounting for almost 12% of DALYs
- Globally, mental ailments are more prevalent among women than men, with prevalence being particularly high during women's reproductive years

How SV leads to MHDs?

- The pathways by which SV damages women's mental health may be psychological, biomedical, or behavioral
- SV puts chronic strain on marital relations → psychological distress
- Violence-ridden and tense relationships and negative verbal exchanges might over time incur problematic autonomic, endocrine, and immunological changes → overall deterioration in physical health
- SV erodes the trust and undermines the chances of negotiations on important issues → marital relations produce mental stress instead of providing emotional support

Prevalence of SV

- The women living in developing countries, including Pakistan, are more vulnerable to adverse health outcomes because of their relatively powerless social position vis-à-vis men and their economic dependence on the perpetrators.
- In Pakistan, women are reported to be frequent victims of SV, ranging from minor acts of violence to acid throwing to honour killings.

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- 39 percent of ever-married women age 15-49 years have experienced physical or emotional SV in their lifetime
- Emotional SV is more common (32 percent) than physical SV (27 percent)
- Prevalence of SV → the high gender disparity in the areas of health, education, and economic and political participation

- When combining high prevalence rates with a low likelihood of reporting → higher chance of negative physical and emotional effects of abuse without adequate support or services.
- This systematic and institutionalized discrimination makes women dependent on men and more vulnerable to violence.
- In such a setting, the SV can be even more detrimental to women's health than in more democratic countries as they lack personal resources and social support to “control the damage.”

Mental Health

- Like violence, the phenomenology of mental health is complex and multi-causal
- In Pakistan, mental ailments are stigmatized and are usually perceived and treated via various superstitious beliefs
- As a result, the majority of women are unlikely to seek biomedical treatment for such ailments

Findings

- Violence is a difficult concept to quantify and measure.
- In some cultures, minor acts of violence are considered to be “routine matters” and may not be thought to have a significant impact on the health of the victims
- The women reported severe psychological violence as the most common type of violence, followed by severe sexual and severe physical violence during the 12 months preceding the interview.
- Similarly, severe past psychological violence was the most prevalent type of past violence, followed by severe physical and severe sexual violence.

- The persistence of violence in women's lives was reflected in the fact that SV was not a one time random episode or isolated phenomenon but might be a continuous occurrence upon which their marital relations were configured.
- The continuity and persistence of violence in intimate relations inflict harm on the physical and psychological health of women.
- The relatively high prevalence of SV in Pakistan may consistent with the overall increase in all types of violence in the country, combined with deteriorating economic, social, and political conditions,

- Our study indicated that more than half (54%) of the women reported poor mental health.
- Other community-based epidemiological studies conducted in Pakistan also reported nearly the same prevalence (60%) of anxiety and depressive disorders among women

- Violence has a long-term and lasting negative impact on human psychology, as violent acts are not easily forgotten.
- One reason for the persistence of violence and its associated mental health damage could be the “cultural blindness” of both cause and effect of the phenomena.
- In Pakistan, especially in rural areas, SV is still largely ignored by considering it a “private matter”
- The same is the case with mental disorders, which are readily termed “women’s problems,” and are treated superstitiously and non-seriously.
- One of the reasons behind this type of behaviour is the high level of tolerance of violence against women and massive mental health illiteracy in Pakistan

Conclusions

- In Pakistan, the issue of SV is under-researched especially the research on SV and its association with women's mental health need more investigation.
- It warrants a systematic investigation of the issue to enhance the understanding of policy makers so that they are able to formulate an effective & culturally sensitive intervention program for the mitigation of SV.
- Concerted and committed efforts of all the stakeholders, including the civil society organizations, media, religious elites, and other formal institutions.
- Without broad-based and integrated strategy, quick fixes can hardly save women from violence and coercion.

- Thank You