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Malik Mamoon Munir

Malik Haroon Munir

Ume Rubaca

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## **The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown**

By Malik Mamoon Munir<sup>1</sup>, Malik Haroon Munir<sup>2</sup>, Ume Rubaca<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

The present study documents the vital outcome of COVID-19 lockdown on the lifespan of women in Pakistan. The lockdown has affected the unemployment rate, particularly in the rural region of the country. Passing along the eleven in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion (FGD) conducted in rural parts of the twin cities (Islamabad & Rawalpindi), the survey demonstrated that the ruination of the income level during COVID-19 lockdown has increased partner violence in the country. The information received further revealed that the bread earners of the families are enduring greater levels of stress and anxiety eventually resulting in a substantial growth in intimate partner violence (IPV).

*Keywords:* Intimate partner violence, Stress, Income level, COVID-19, Pakistan

### **Introduction**

The coronavirus disease 2019, or COVID-19, created disastrous panic for many reasons around the globe. It's a novel disease which means humans have little or no resistance to fight against it (World Health Organization, 2020). Many top researchers and scientists are striving to identify the virus's behavior with only little history on it. In order to avoid its spread, countries have had to lock down (Roesch, Amin, Gupta, & Moreno, 2020). The transportation, businesses, financial stock markets, educational institutes and every life affair have become erratic resulting in irrational life behavior.

Pakistan like the rest of the world has been affected by COVID-19. The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 26 February 2020 when a student in Sindh province tested positive upon his return from Iran (Government of Pakistan, 2020). A recent report released by National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination in June 2020 cited a fear of 100,000 or more new cases during the second wave of COVID-19 by December 2020. The super spreader was believed

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<sup>1</sup> Malik Mamoon Munir is an Assistant Professor in constituent institution of Bahria University, Pakistan. He received his PhD Degree in the field of Management Sciences from Bahria University Islamabad Pakistan. Prior to joining the university, he worked for 10 years at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, USA, as head of finance in Pakistan. In this capacity, he led teams tasked with managing the project scheme, design, monitoring and evaluation, and budgeting roles within the operating unit.

<sup>2</sup> Malik Haroon Munir is studying in Master of Public Policy at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University. He works with the Ministry of Human Rights and Minority Affairs in Punjab, Pakistan. His key work focuses on addressing the human rights violations in the province, in coordination with local governing bodies.

<sup>3</sup> Ume Rubaca is a doctoral student in the Department of Management Sciences, Comsats University, Islamabad. Her thesis entitled "A multilevel moderated mediational model of the supervisor incivility, resilience, emotional exhaustion, and colleague's job neglect: A weekly diary study", explores to test a moderated mediation model in the Hospital industry of Pakistan extending Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. It promises important and unique innovations through an engagement with the registered nurses and their colleagues serving in tertiary care public hospitals of Pakistan.

to be a Tablighi Jamaat religious congregation in Lahore, Punjab in March 2020 responsible for 27% of cases in the state (NHSRC, 2020).

This virus has changed the land situation, conceivably incessantly. Medicine has limited knowledge of the virus and therefore determined that, as of right now, 'lockdown' seems to be the sole cure. The majority of businesses are closing in Pakistan and the country with limited economic power will face tough times in the years ahead (Government of Pakistan, 2020). The suspension of the operations is raising the monetary challenges (economic loss of about Rs. 2.5 trillion) and also drastically increasing the unemployment rate in Pakistan. It is estimated an additional 18.5 million people could lose their jobs in Pakistan between 2020 and 2021 (Government of Pakistan, 2020).

Social distancing, isolation and excessive care are getting hard to practice in Pakistan because of the country's social cultural traits. The country needs to be ready for an epidemic of clinical depression due to all social restrictions and increasing unemployment. It is projected that an oddly huge percentage of the country's population may develop depression with an inequitable distribution due to the unique environmental stresses of COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020). The depression and anxiety due to social blocking and unemployment support the various societal evils which mainly include violence against women in the country. As per the demographics of the country, a great ratio of the population resides in the rural part with limited access and awareness of knowledgeable facts, therefore, nurturing more adverse conditions for a woman's life in Pakistan.

Globally, 30 percent of women are physically abused by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Roesch, et al., 2020). The incidence of physical violence increases in humanitarian crises, including natural disasters and conflict (Parkinson & Zara, 2013). The impact of global pandemics is no less than a natural disaster, and the gendered implications are less known and recognized (Roesch, et al., 2020). The increase in the incidence of intimate partner violence (IPV) on women is also evident in previous epidemics. In particular, epidemics like Zika and Ebola have suggested a greater shift in the scale and nature of physical violence against women because of the impact of epidemics on economic and social life (Roesch, et al., 2020). Today, the world faces a lockdown to slow the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, the risk of IPV increases, particularly for women already in an abusive relationship (Nyandoro, 2018; Parkinson & Zara, 2013).

Research into Violence against women has been of significant value in the field of public health (Akhter & Wilson, 2016; Nimble & Chinnasamy, 2020). During this heavy time of the COVID-19 public health disaster, it is imperative to bring attention to the physical, societal, psychological and emotional abuses against women in Pakistan.

### **Violence against Women**

The term 'violence against women' is defined by Flood and Pease (2009) as, "The range of sexually, psychologically, and physically coercive acts used against women by current or former male intimate partners (p. 125)." These forms of abuse, although most pervasive in the world, are recognized the least in human rights philosophy, especially in developing countries (Akhter & Wilson, 2016; Martin et al., 1999). The alternate terms used in the study of literature for violence against women are Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), domestic violence, courtship violence, partner abuse, domestic abuse, marital rape and battering (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018; Cordier, 2010; Haj-Yahia, 2003). The prevalence estimation rate of violence against women is difficult to approximate globally (Reyes, Solis, & Marlene, 2020). This is imputable to the under reporting of

cases, inconsistency in the definition of this issue and privacy of epidemiological studies (Bajwa & Meerali, 2020; Lawoko, 2006).

Still, statistics have revealed that one out of three women around the world is exposed to IPV in her life (Casey et al., 2018; Heise, 1998; Warshaw, 1993). The facts further indicate that in IPV, a woman is battered every 15 seconds (Ruhi, 2010). Moreover, the physical assault of women by their intimate partners ranges from ten to sixty nine percent (10- 69%) (Naz, 2011).

Violence against women is certainly not a spontaneous or unintentional action (Bajwa & Meerali, 2020; Flood & Pease, 2009). Its expansion is based on steady attitude and beliefs regarding the status and role of women in a society (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018; Haj-Yahia, 1998). Social orders at multiple levels in a society are conceived to be accountable for men's attitudes towards violence against women (Flood & Pease, 2009). The rise of IPV particularly in a crisis situation for men is founded on three segments (Heise, 1998; Neuwirth, 2005). First, at the initial individual level, men dominate through violent attitudes to occupy the decision-making processes. Second, at the community level, violence against women is normalized and tolerated. Third, at the country level, biased judgement in the lawsuits permit committers to prove themselves impenitent.

The existing literature has indicated that in Asian and African contexts, men are the ultimate controllers of their spouse's reproductive decisions and sexuality (Martin et al., 1999). For example, in Ghana, the majority of the men consider that they possess the sound right to beat their wives if their wives use contraceptive means without informing their husbands (Bawah et al., 1999). Similarly, in developing countries like Pakistan, men think that symbolic humiliation of women is necessary if she demonstrates negligence in the tending of children or refuses sex (Abraham, 2000; Fikree, Razzak, & Durocher, 2005).

With the diligence of some rationalization, men seek to rationalize their acts of violence against women (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018). For instance, men sometimes use the cover of religion, masculine beliefs and depending the shelter from cultural stereotypes (Flood & Pease, 2009; Mullaney, 2007; Munir, 2002; Postmus et al., 2020; Simister & Mehta, 2010.). However, such beliefs vary between men due to their racial characteristics, ethnicity, socioeconomic traits, religiosity, level of education and the perception of women in their society (Atkins & Kessel, 2008; Goodman, Smyth, Borges, & Singer, 2009; Khawaja, Linos, & El-Roueiheb, 2008).

Although many studies have looked into the various IPV dimensions in Asian, Middle Eastern and African perspective (Fikree et al., 2005; Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2002; Kim, 2019; Reyes et al., 2020), there is a lack of literature highlighting men's attitude towards violence against women in crisis situations (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018; Flood & Pease, 2009). It is imperative to look at the issue of violence against women in difficult economic contexts, such as Pakistan, and to highlight its trend, especially in the domain of IPV.

### *Pakistan: Violence against Women*

In Pakistan, violence against women is believed to be a personal family matter and any kind of intervention is not tolerated nor welcomed at any point (Ali & Gavini, 2008). Existence of rigid cultural and religious practices have supported such social acts more frequently in the rural area (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). A survey led by the United Nations found that 90 percent of women are verbally and emotionally abused under IPV whereas over 50 percent of women experience physical abuse (Tinker, 1998). It is further estimated that 70 to 90 percent of women in Pakistan are subject to domestic violence (Ali, Asad, Mogren, & Krantz, 2011). Domestic violence occurs in the form of marital rape, honor killings, kitchen burning and acid attacks (Andersson et al., 2010), whereas spousal abuse happens so commonly that it is not considered a social offense

(Critelli, 2010). Sometimes spousal abuse results in murder, emotionally forcing a woman to suicide or burning through bursting of the kitchen stove (Fair, 2011). According to a study conducted in Punjab province, 350 out of 1,000 women admitted in various hospitals were victims of IPV (Manzoor, Rahman, & Bano, 2013). According to Dawn News report published on 21 Oct 2020, since 2011, police stations in the rural area have filed more than 80,000 cases of violence against women with the highest number (7,051 cases) in the first 6 months of the current year. Out of these, on average, at least 2 events reported daily are due to burning incidents (Manzoor et al., 2013). Between 1999 and 2019, the total number of burn cases of women reported in Pakistan are 3,412 (World Health Organization, 2020).

Honor killing or Karo-Kari is another type of violence against women in Pakistan (Khalil, 2010; Zakar, 2012). This premeditated killing generally prevails in tribal and rural regions of Sindh province (Ali & Gavini, 2008). Despite uncertainties of a female's extra-marital relations, the male household member is obliged to kill the female on the uncertainties of her (Khalil, 2010). By doing so, family honor is restored. According to a report by the Pakistan Human Rights Association in June 2020, the number of killings increased from 900 to 1,500 between 2016 and 2019.

Civil society organizations have keenly taken up the topic of violence against women in Pakistan (Jilani & Ahmed, 2004; Naz, 2011), enabling the lawmakers to recognize the rigor and significance of the issue at policy level (Raza & Murad, 2010; Ruhi, 2010). The majority of the inquiries have focused on the IPV prevalence rate in relationship with sociodemographic characters and its health outcomes (Critelli, 2010; Shaikh, 2003). Nevertheless, the topic of violence against women in the depression phase of COVID-19 has not even been talked about. The lack of research is further evidenced by the fact that only one research paper so far has addressed men's attitude towards violence against women in Pakistan, and this was during normal conditions of the country and not during a lockdown situation like COVID-19 (Fikree et al., 2005).

## **Theoretical Base**

Although many theories exist to explain the violence against women, such theories are unable to completely represent this topic because of its multifactorial nature. For instance, the social learning theory proposed by Bandura (Campbell & Humphreys, 1993), addressed male acceptance of psychological and physical violence against women as conditioned behavior. The conditioned behavior derives the IPV social situation which is grounded on the frequency of abuse instrumenting aggressive actions. Exchange theory, a component of social learning theory, states that men perform abusive actions against women because they perceive it as a rightful action to perform to control and dominate (Galles & Cornell, 1985).

Feminist theory has argued the patriarchal social phenomena present in the majority of societies (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). In such societies, violence against women is an outcome of prostitution permissibility and sexist constraints of keeping women in submissive attitudes. This theory further entails that this submissive attitude of women acts as a shield from the men's fury.

The Bronfenbrenner (1986) nested ecological framework has also been discussed for addressing child abuse and violence against women (Edleson, 2000). The framework suggested that human beings' behaviors are formed through interactions with their social environments which consists of five levels, namely individual, microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem and macrosystem (Belsky, 1980; Edleson, 2000). At the individual level, it is influenced by personal and biological factors. The microsystem level comprises the family and work conditions. The mesosystem level entails human beings' interactions in microsystems among them. The ecosystem

level narrates the systems and structures of the fellowship of human beings where they live. Lastly, the macrosystem level describes the role of culture on human beings' behaviors.

Ordinarily, the behaviors of the human beings are derived from cultural norms (Martin et al., 1999). Males generally perform 'masculine' behaviors which is qualified by their courageousness, bravery and machismo attitude, whereas females generally behave with 'feminine' attitudes of submission and fragility (Lawoko, 2006). In summary, males exercise more dominant behavior than females (Jilani & Ahmed, 2004; Khalil, 2010; Mullaney, 2007). In some cases, religious values develop the traditional culture of the society (Raza & Murad, 2010). For instance, Islam discourages the act of divorce and so do Catholic Christians (Ruhi, 2010). Religious values make it difficult for female victims to end violent relationships (Shaheed, 2010) implying that traditional religion-based culture dominates all rational decisions of women (Hajjar, 2004, Jilani, Ahmed, 2004). Another strong driving force for developing cultural norms is media (Abraham, 2005). Media usually projecting violence against women through various means encourages male partners to commit violent acts (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). In addition to this, lack of financial powers versus necessities creates stress and depression among males in the society (Nimble & Chinnasamy, 2020; Rema & Kaur, 2020). As a result, men perceive violence against women as a remedy to obtain satisfaction within their daily lives (Zakar, 2012). Roesch, et al. (2020) stated that physical violence against women generally increases in scale and nature during any natural disaster such as the Zika and Ebola epidemics because they each had a significant impact on a common person's economic and social life.

## **Method**

In order to measure violence against women during the COVID-19 phase in Pakistan, this study has employed the purposive sampling method (Zakar, 2012) and conducted 11 in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion (FGD) with married females selected from rural parts of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Because contacting married females by any outsider for some rationality is not welcomed by male managers of the households, the community Lady Health Workers (LHWs) were approached for the selection of respondents in each rural part of both cities to conduct in-depth interviews and FGD as they are well versed with local community protocols and were able to assist in identifying the suitable respondents. During the lockdown situation in Pakistan due to COVID-19, their services became highly valuable. The study also engaged two female students from the social science department of a public university in Islamabad in order to conduct the interviews from the identified sample. Both students were pursuing their master's in science degree programs and were aware of the research protocols and interview techniques. To further strengthen their knowledge, two days of training on interview techniques were applied after adopting all COVID-19 preventive measures. These measures removed the gender barrier for conducting the interviews and made it easy to explain the nature and objectives of the interviews to female respondents in a safe environment. Moreover, female students also secured the respondents' voluntary participation in the present study. LHWs introduced the female students to the respondents to conduct the interviews, and then the female students were informed about the purpose of the research as well as given a brief introduction of the interview procedure. All precautionary measures regarding COVID-19 were also implemented while approaching female respondents and conducting interviews.

The refusal rate of participation in the interviews was about 21 percent (4 out of 19), which means that only 4 female respondents among the identified females refused to participate in the

in-depth interviews and FGD. The sampling process was restricted due to COVID-19 limitations and respondent convenience was also ensured. Four female respondents participated in the FGD whereas 11 female respondents participated in the in-depth interviews. The whole process of information collection took 4 weeks during April 2020. When identifying FGD participants, it was determined that the respondents should be of diverse socioeconomic background, ethnicity and education level to conduct a productive discussion to gain relevant insight and information about violence against women during COVID-19. Prior to commencing the information collection process, an informed consent form with respondents' signature/ thumb impression (from illiterate females) was obtained. In-depth interviews were conducted within the respective female respondents' homes, whereas the FGD was conducted at the community LHW home in a rural part of Rawalpindi city.

All warranted precautionary measures against COVID-19 were observed while conducting the in-depth interviews and FGD. These measures included wearing masks, seating plans for appropriate social distancing and usage of hand gloves by the interviewers and study respondents.

### *Study Instrument*

Prior to formulating the interview questions, an interview guide was prepared (Bowling, 2009). Questions which were culturally sensitive (for instance relating to sexual violence) were avoided (Zakar, Zakar, & Kramer, 2012). The interview guide focused on explaining the violence against women in any form of psychological and physical act of men against women, which eventually generates distress and pain in women's lives (World Health Organization, 2002). Referable to the family engagements of the women, the duration (not more than 1 hour) and timings (preferably daytime) of the interviews were also kept in mind after a discussion with LHWs. Language barriers were avoided by conducting in-depth interviews in the official language of Pakistan, 'Urdu.' To prevent losing any little piece of information from the respondents during the in-depth interviews, an audio recorder was used with the prior permission of the female respondents.

The in-depth interview technique was employed using an interview guide which allowed the present study to attain the research objectives and identify the novel information (Bowling, 2009). In order to conduct the in-depth interviews, open-ended questions were used for gathering detailed aspects on the topic. These interview questions were formulated based on the study instrument available in the existing literature on violence against women (Banning et al., 2009; Cordier, 2010; Zakar et al., 2012). However, interview questions were carefully designed to understand the psychological and physical violence against women in the country during the period of COVID-19. Moreover, structuring interview questions and conversation techniques to explore novel information was based on the Bowling philosophy which stated that "Deep beneath the surface of superficial responses to obtain true meanings that individuals assign to events, and the complexities of their attitudes and behaviors (2009, p.392)."

### *Data Analysis*

All the respondents aged between 26 to 45 years old and had diverse demographics with regard to level of education, duration of marriage, number of children, household monthly income level and source of income (See Table 1). Out of 15 respondents (FGD and in-depth interviews), 13 were living in the joint family system.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of In-depth Interviews (N=11) and FGD (N=04) Participants**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age</b>		
Less than 30 years	3	20.00
30 to 40 years	10	66.67
More than 40 years	2	13.33
<b>Length of Marriage</b>		
Less than 01 year	1	6.67
01 to 10 Years	6	40.00
More than 10 years	8	53.33
<b>Family Monthly Income (PKR)*</b>		
Less than 20,000	5	33.33
20,000 to 40,000	9	60.00
More than 40,000	1	6.67
<b>Education</b>		
No Schooling	1	6.67
Up to 10 years of Schooling	3	20.00
More than 10 years of Schooling	11	73.33
<b>Source of Income</b>		
Private Sector Job	9	60.00
Government Sector Job	2	13.33
Own Business	4	26.67
<b>Number of Children</b>		
0 to 2 Children	3	20.00
3 to 4 Children	7	46.67
More than 4 Children	5	33.33

\* 01 USD = 165 PKR

All in-depth interviews were supported by audio recording and then transcribed verbatim (Zakar et al., 2012). Afterwards, all transcripts were translated into English. Systematic examination of commonalities among the respondents' views was carried out using constant comparison and analytic induction strategies for generating themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All transcripts were reviewed multiple times for careful identification of similar ideas from the respondents' in-depth interviews. Then patterns were discovered by coding themes into several thematic categories (Zakar et al., 2012). All common information/data were then grouped into thematic categories to strengthen the patterns. Finally, theoretical constructs were identified from



the translation of the findings. This was the continuous refinement process until all occurrences of similarities and contradictions were described (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The robustness of the responses was further achieved by sharing the first transcript with the female interviewers and it was further decided to discuss it with conveniently available study respondents (Zakar et al., 2012). This technique supported the identification of any errors in recording responses and allowed for clarification on any specific detail.

### *Limitations and Strengths of the Research*

While conducting the present research, the study has encountered some limitations. First, due to COVID-19 lockdown, it was difficult to access the general population of the country to conduct in-depth interviews and FGDs. Hence, the information was collected from only 15 respondents in total (11 respondents for in-depth interviews and 4 respondents for FGD) limiting generalizability of the results. The information was gathered from women living in the rural part of the two metropolises of the country so the findings are not the true representation of all the women, especially women residing in the urban areas or belonging to the upper class in the country.

Nevertheless, the present study is the first qualitative research of its kind in Pakistan which explores and highlights the sensitive issue of violence against women during COVID-19 lockdown. The results of the work will initiate an evidence-based debate on violence against women and add to the existing scientific knowledge particularly during the depression phase in a country.

Pakistan is a highly volatile country where gender-based disparities are practiced widely (Naz, 2011). Women in the country are the victims of social exclusion and poverty (Raza & Murad, 2010). Although there has been some progress towards resolving gender-based issues, gender equality is still a challenge (Naz, 2011). According to the World Economic Forum report on the global gender parity index, Pakistan is nearly last on the list (ranks 151 out of 153 states). The report further highlighted that, in Pakistan, economic opportunities for women are really limited. Only 32.7% of women are employed as compared to men in Pakistan. The global gender parity index offers,

“Benchmarks on national gender gaps in economic, political, education and health-based criteria, and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions, and over time” (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010, p.3).

Similarly, during extreme conditions of gender-based disparities, the worldview and mindset of men towards women are important to study. The present research suggests a foundation towards highlighting the concern of gender-based disparity and violence against women particularly during COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Findings**

### *Women’s Perception Regarding their Status in Society*

The present study respondents were asked to provide their feedback on the women’s general status in the daily life affairs. The majority of the respondents (10 out of 11) believed that they are not treated “equally” to men. Due to this unequal treatment, men are considered noble and superior in the society. Women’s status in the society is challenging and “respect” is most precious

to earn. One respondent in her 40s observed, “In my entire life I was unable to speak about my wishes and little dreams of life, as I was meant to obey the decision making of men in the form of father, brother and then my husband.” Another respondent explained that, “Adult females in general and married women in particular, have to meet and manage the home chores in an efficient manner, as for husbands we are a cheap hand.”

One of the respondents explained the nature of husband as, “He considers me as he has all the right to use me the way he wanted it and even obeying him and his family all the time, I am unable to find a respect of a wife or a status of a regular member of the family.” Another respondent replied, “I am counting my days that how soon my kids will be grown up and I may get the opportunity to live this life with protection as my kids will be my shield.” Usually, husbands attempt to display his commanding position to family members in relation to his wife by aggressively charging her with various domestic affairs (Ali & Gavini, 2008; Andersson et al., 2010; Casey et al., 2018). This behavior gives husbands a pride and a claim of a good household manager in Pakistani culture (Banning et al., 2009).

Six out of 11 respondents believed that men consider themselves as special creatures. Men’s behaviors and attitudes toward their counterparts is rude and harsh in the majority of cases. One of the respondents with three children and 12 years of marriage further explained that, “My utmost priority is to please my husband and to obey his order religiously so that I can get a minimum opportunity to become a victim of his physical violence especially in front of my children.” Another respondent stated that:

“We being the equal in status by books of religion and law are the victims of all wrong doings happenings in the man’s life and his family. We rarely being considered a human being and thinking about regarding our own rights and identity in the society is out of question.”

The similar output is obtained from the FGD as well. All 4 participants of the FGD unanimously agreed on the prevailing role of the men in the society and women's status is ignored in every walk of life. Although one participant having a master's degree and working as a schoolteacher highlighted that, “Part of NGOs have enlightened women to realize their importance in the society and not to get an ordinary ‘sex servant’ of her husband.” Even the participant emphasized the recent famous slogan on social media after Aurat March (Woman's day March) “Mera Jism Meri Merzi (My body my choice),” which encouraged women to realize their rights in the light of legal philosophy. Nevertheless, due to the higher criticism and religious extremism, Pakistani women struggle even to assume it from the society (Bhutta et al., 2011). Hence, it was discovered from the participant’s viewpoint during FGD that women's status in the country holds no value and their existence is simply a subject of an ordinary worker performing various duties in various roles and men in actuality are the real boss of the society thus, supporting the feminist theory regarding patriarchal dominance (Nyandoro, 2018).

#### *Women’s Beliefs Regarding Violence against Them*

In any society, violence against women is an unpleasant act and no faith, tradition, culture or law allows it (Durfee, 2018). In Pakistani communities, men expect women to be submissive or “Sabbir” (show patience) and must be the protector of her own chastity (Ayyub, 2000). The men generally perform this violence when they perceive that women are violating any norm and it is their responsibility to discipline women by inflicting violence upon them (Abraham, 2005; Ali &

Gavini, 2008; Durfee, 2018). Violence against women is not restricted to developing nations like Pakistan, but developed countries also witness violence due to biased translation of religion (Flood & Pease, 2009; Zengenene & Susanti, 2019). Respondents in the present study were asked about their feelings towards violence against women in the present cultural context. It was noted that the majority (9 out of 11) of respondents linked men's action of violence to cultural and traditional practices and the frustration in men is merely due to failure in achieving quality of life. Two out of 11 respondents connected the act of violence with the men's illiteracy. The basic terminologies used by the respondents to explain the causes of the violence against women were mard ki mardangi (men's masculinity), ghairatmand (Saigon), gher ka sarbarah (house holder), kamao put (money earner) and shouhar ki khaslat (husband's nature).

During the in-depth interviews, one respondent with five children and having a master's degree in economics stated that,

“I belong to a society where the husband has the license to beat the wife and it is considered a very normal behavior. This is because men are the bread earners of the family and women being single or alone are regarded as an underprivileged. My husband is a simple HSSC degree holder (12th class) and he fears from my qualification so in order to hold his upper hand, he exhausts me and harasses me in front of my kids”.

Another respondent living in a combined family system revealed that:

“I am the victim of this men's violence, first by my father before marriage and now with my husband. This is nowadays not a surprising aspect for me regarding men. My parents and relatives know about my husband's physical violence against me, still they prefer to watch me in a marital relationship rather to protest or highlight his immoral conduct.”

FGD findings supported the increase in violence against women in Pakistan during the COVID-19 lockdown and considered social norms, culture, and male dominance as a basis for the immoral act of violence against women. Most of the respondents (3 out of 4) conceptualized that a woman in the role of a wife has to be patient and loyal to the husband. Despite a woman's master (husband) being able to control her in whichever way he chooses, he remains unhappy with her due to his illiteracy, economic challenges, family pressure and masculine behavior (Durfee, 2018; Hamid, Johansson, & Rubenson, 2010; Jilani & Ahmed, 2004). One of the participants of the FGD who is a medical technician serving in a public hospital explained that she is the equal family income contributor, manages all home and kitchen activities, takes care of her children, obeys her husband and listens to her husband's parents, but still she faces physical violence from her husband and mother-in-law because she has only four daughters and no son. This is another dilemma in rural parts of Pakistani society where people prefer to have sons over daughters (Naz, 2011). The FGD has also offered that the “ideal wife” status for a woman is impossible to achieve in our society. The woman puts up all her allegiance to the husband's family after marriage, but has fears every morning of physical violence, threat of divorce, acid attacks, stove burstings or being kicked out of the home (Khalil, 2010; Ler, Sivakami, & Monarrez, 2017; Raza & Murad, 2010).

Furthermore, FGD has further exposed that in Pakistan, “Traditional Mullahs” (Religious scholars) misinterpret religion based on their false knowledge which further perpetuates violence

against women. These Traditional Mullahs equipped with misleading and sectarian literature obtained from conservative Madrassas (religious schools) propagate the negativity in men against women (Shaheed, 2010). In Pakistan, there is no proactive regulatory body to review the capabilities of these mullahs and to audit them based on their qualifications and knowledge. Men in most examples, seek advice from their community mullahs and act consequently (Hajjar, 2004).

During an in-depth interview, a respondent with primary education (equal to 5th grade) and limited knowledge about the current state of affairs in the country (including COVID 19) revealed that, “I am a female parent of two (2) children and I am living in a two rooms house with my husband and his seven more family members. I am responsible for all house chores as well as children grooming. Besides that, I am doing cleaning work in nearby town houses as a maid and earn money to fulfill basic needs of the household. Notwithstanding, I become the victim of physical violence almost daily. I have intimated this behavior to my parents many times, but they snub me not to disrespect my husband at whatever cost.” This is an example that supports the Social Learning Theory because the physical violence against women increases if men are influenced from negative patterns of society and perceives IPV as a traditional corrective measure. Additionally, COVID-19 lockdown has created economic challenges in many households that have led to men using IPV to minimize stress in support of Exchange Theory.

#### *Beliefs about the Violence against Women during COVID 19*

The present research aimed to investigate the extent of violence against women during the current period of COVID-19. For this reason, interview questions relevant to understanding the COVID-19 situation and its outcomes were also asked. All 15 respondents (of interviews and FGD) agreed and explained their understanding around this gloomy state of affairs (COVID-19) in the country and complained about the challenging life situation. Besides complaining about inflation, economic challenges, social life dis-connectivity, transportation issues and other grocery difficulties, they also highlighted the increase in negative behaviors among the household members (Nimble & Chinnsamy, 2020).

The information revealed that the majority of the respondents during in-depth interviews (9 out of 11) perceived the increase in intensity of violence against women during the COVID-19 period in Pakistan. The remaining 2 out of 11 respondents believed no change in the intensity of violence against women had occurred.

One respondent mentioned that, “Physical violence was not a routine for me. All the same, since my husband has begun spending more time at home, he has been more belligerent and wild. He has been stubborn while talking to me and without any reason he beats me.” Another respondent aged at 43 years old and employed in a government job explained:

“My husband has lost his job as he was working in a cement producing factory. He is in stress and depression due to this loss. And I rarely had this issue of physical violence from him only since he has lost his job, he brings away all his frustration on me by tormenting me.”

One more respondent during the in-depth interview explained:

“I am living in the rural part of the country where men are illiterate and poor. And due to this COVID-19, people have no income to feed the children. We used to earn money by selling fruits and vegetables on carts but due to lockdown we have been

restricted to home. Committing suicide due to hunger happens commonly here. Although I am a victim of IPV and it's happening more frequently since we have this lockdown situation but who cares if our tummies are waiting for anything to eat."

One respondent aged 32 years old, holding a graduation degree, and with 4 kids narrated:

"Life was normal, and I had rarely faced IPV, but since this COVID-19 has brought the fear of the deadly virus, my husband is in more stress and depression due to closure of his electric parts shop. His attitude has changed with me and shows the irritated behavior towards me and the children. Economic loss is forcing him to perform IPV and I understand his mental status. So now I am holding on to this whole crisis situation and pleading to get rid of the IPV soon."

FGD has further described the intensity and frequency of violence against women during the current period of COVID-19. One of the FGD respondents with general information about COVID-19 enlightened that, "The COVID-19 has several other symptoms to humans besides a medical disease." The respondent stated that:

"People are receiving stress and becoming aggressive due to the current uncommon social practices. Lockdown has caged the people in their homes and threat of hunger is producing frustration. Normal business life is the current requirement. People have less fear of this virus and more fear from the government policies and inflation. Hence, in such scenarios husbands are more violent towards their spouses."

In the FGD, all the participants (4 out of 4) indicated the similar stressful conduct of the men towards women and indicated that aggressive behavior is increasing the IPV in the houses. The government should enhance the medical facilities, promote general awareness and control the inflation to alleviate the common person's life. The current income levels of the majority of people in the rural regions of the country cannot keep pace with the price of commodities. The ongoing situation has also affected the work and business environment where the rotation/employment patterns of workers as per normal routine has become more complex. Enhanced psychological and physical pressure is contributing heavily towards anxiety, and social interaction has been rejected. The increased volume and frequency of IPV at homes during COVID-19 lockdown has supported the Brofenbrenner (1986) ecological framework argument.

## **Discussion**

The data received from the in-depth interviews and FGD revealed that violence against women persists in the Pakistani society and due to COVID-19 lockdown, its vividness and frequency has increased. The women aim to achieve "ideal wife" status which is impossible to accomplish. Men are hard to satisfy with the women's performance, particularly families living in the rural areas of the country and have limited income. The anxiety and stress are producing aggressive behavior in men and violent behavior victimizes women on a daily basis (Rema &

Kaur, 2020). Marital equality exists in the religious books, but its interpretation and implementation are undermined by the men during COVID-19 lockdown.

The information generated from the in-depth interviews and FGD revealed the study participants' major focus on the "ideal wife" notion and the husbands' stressful attitudes due to COVID-19 lockdown is increasing the violence against women in the country. The construct of "ideal wife" sounds similar to the "docile bodies" notion of Foucault (1977). The concept of "docile bodies" represents the submissive and controlled behavior of the women and they can be "improved" to satisfy the men through their services (Foucault, 1977). In principle, Foucault's docility is generally achieved through force, discipline and violence. According to the present study, men desire to perceive women in ideal standards and failing to these criteria results in application of docility tools which mainly includes violence against women (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). Still, it was interesting to note that besides the "ideal wife" status, men in stress and frustration during the period of COVID-19 lockdown are also using violence as a means for their internal satisfaction.

The present survey data analysis revealed that men, through violence against women, hide their fears of low income and anxiety and declare their wives "fragile bodies and unwise." Women in such state, besides requiring protection, also need guidance, monitoring and transmutation. However, social norms require men to practice command and surveillance to conform submissive behavior of their wives (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Ler et al., 2017). Therefore, violence against women becomes embedded and ingrained in the very structure of the husband-wife relationship (Postmus et al., 2020).

Moreover, it may be discovered that the driving forces of stress and anxiety due to COVID-19 lockdown are resulting in rigid forms of stereotypes narrated by the study respondents about men's aggressive behavior. The men's aggressive and violent behavior also provides men with "guidelines for action" in order to combat the stress despite the consequence of societal economical pressure due to COVID 19-lockdown. Normative forces derive these gender role guidelines in the society (Zakar et al., 2012). The question of women empowerment is always an unpalatable topic of interest for the community (Ali & Gavini, 2008; Bhutta et al., 2011; Critelli, 2010). This is because the culture dictates men behave in ethical and real manner practices of masculinity over women (Chancer, 2019; Fair, 2011; Hamid et al., 2010). If men fail to behave so, they acquire the label of "wife's subservient" which is stigmatizing and embarrassing not just for men, but for their family as well (Jilani & Ahmed, 2004; Khalil, 2010).

According to Schrock and Padavic (2007), men's belief regarding their entitlement of male privilege is a psychological precondition for choosing violence. The enriched local interpretation of false religious legislations and culture by various mullahs further strengthen the husband's "rights" to beat their wives (Hajjar, 2004; Shaheed, 2010). This violent behavior or practicing IPV is concealed by downplaying its magnitude and visibility in public and "soft words" are used to describe abusive actions to neutralize its effect (Chancer, 2019; Ruhi, 2010). Men wisely justify and plead the rationality and necessity of their violent behavior (Durfee, 2018). Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, and Lewis (2001) contended,

"Not only is power deeply embedded in the language we use, power is embedded in the language that we do not practice; there is power in quiet. Women and men are differently located in relation to the naming of violence: Men have more power than women and can use this power to define and give meaning to (their) behavior. (p. 697)."

The modernization and globalization forces are exerting pressure for the need of modification in the indigenous civilization in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2011; Andersson et al., 2010). Currently, the country is struggling between the culture and the need for the modern era for defining the structure and nature of gender relations. COVID-19 is appended to this struggle when economic challenges are adding stress and anxiety among male members of the household. The stress generates mental imbalances and increases nervousness (Ayyub, 2000; Kim, 2019). Men or husbands struggle between the economic pressure and daily needs of their families to simply provide the bare minimum (Postmus et al., 2020; Raza & Murad, 2010). Even so, when an imbalance takes place between incomes and expenses, men's attitudes consider women at home responsible and inflict IPV (Hausmann et al., 2010; Stark & Hester, 2019). The existing literature has indicated that women around the globe are the victims of IPV even if they agree to contribute to the family income to reduce the husband's stress ((Postmus et al., 2020). For example, studies in Indonesia, Palestine and India revealed that males inflict IPV even on working women to maintain his authority in all circumstances (Ler et al., 2017; Munir, 2005; Simister & Mehta, 2010).

Due to this current COVID-19 lockdown, the general income level of many households in the country is challenging. A recent Gallup survey has reported that 17.3 million people in Pakistan have lost their occupations and the entire number 28 percent of people are at risk for unemployment. If the regime proceeds to impose this lockdown, an extra 40 percent of jobs will be at jeopardy.

According to an article in Dawn news (dated 04 April 2020), Professor Emeritus from Aga Khan University Department of Psychiatry, Dr. Murad Moosa Khan, stated that COVID-19 has resulted in poor mental health outcomes such as depression, post traumatic disorders and anxiety and its result will be unimaginable and enormous. These mental health challenges will further contribute to self-medication by the involved individuals, decreased income, business losses and unemployment will further exacerbate these issues. According to Dr. Ayesha Mian, Associate Professor at the same university practicing pediatric and adult psychiatric revealed that, "Losing a job is a huge trauma and one of the biggest causes of stress." This stress is as terrible as losing a loved one or experiencing a divorce.

According to the UN WOMEN (2020) report on violence against women and girls using data collected during COVID-19, the report indicated a significant rise of IPV during the pandemic. Financial stresses and health while at home, including loss of earnings or livelihoods of women, restricted the access to basic needs and women's abilities to escape from abusive situations. The report highlighted that home confinement of women allows violent partners to utilize COVID-19 restrictions to further apply control and power over women. For this reason, calls to police to report such abusive incidents have increased. Physical violence against domestic and healthcare workers has also increased. Harassment and xenophobia related violence online and in public places are more dominant, and risk of abuse or social exploitation is becoming more likely. The report further emphasized that victimized women's accessibility to quality essential services, informal support networks and psychological support is really limited due to COVID-19 movement restrictions. This is an important health concern and severe human rights violations during COVID-19 thus supporting the theoretical base of the present study.

The violence against women in the form of IPV has generally increased during COVID-19 lockdown across the globe and particularly in developing states like Pakistan. These findings are further backed by Johnson (1995) who proposed the concept of situational couple violence. Situational couple violence occurs occasionally from either wife or husband or both. This sort of

violence occurs within specific circumstances (as outcome of COVID-19) rather than being inflicted against a partner intentionally. Yet, in either instance, women in Pakistan are becoming the victims of physical violence.

The present study has shown that men's violent behavior and controlling attitude against women is on the rise due COVID-19 lockdown. The households with the menace of unemployment and low income are affected most. Nevertheless, there is a need for intervention globally to reactivate the programs for IPV to counter the negative stereotypes of the guild (Zengenene & Susanti, 2019). The government in the rural area is needed to devise certain policies to support low-income households to provide stability. Besides that, relaxation in lockdown, so that masses can leave the home to earn bread and butter for the families, could be a plausible result. The adult females could only avoid coercion and violence if integrated and broad strategies by all stakeholders during this low phase of lockdown exists in Pakistan.



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