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## **Now, You Can Breathe: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences and Resilience of Egyptian Women Victimized by Narcissistic Relationships**

By Nayera Mohamed Shousha<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Narcissistic relationships manifest as nonreciprocal affiliations that allow no room for genuine partnership or cooperation. The trait of narcissism is more prevalent in men than in women. However, Egypt's powerful patriarchal culture has prevented adequate scholarly examination of narcissistic relationships. The current study intends to bridge this gap in knowledge by examining two objectives: a) to investigate the nature of experiences of Egyptian women in narcissistic relationships and b) to elucidate how Egyptian women remain resilient in the aftermath of narcissistic relationships. Data were collected via qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with 27 literate women aged 24–54 years who had experienced narcissistic relationships for at least a year. Four main themes emerged: a) the abusive experiences suffered by the women, b) perception of the narcissist as abusive partner, c) the negative impact of the narcissistic relationship on the women socially and psychologically, and d) women's sources of resilience after leaving this relationship. For the abusive experiences, women suffered from different types of aggressive behaviors (e.g. physical, psychological, and verbal) and they tended to doubt their rationality which is called "the gaslighting effect." The findings indicated that narcissists were perceived by respondents as dominators, vampires, non-empathetic, aggressive, manipulative, and deceiving actors. Accordingly, their relationships with narcissists were detrimental to the psychological and social wellbeing of the women. The results suggest that women need long-term social and emotional support to fully recover from the after-effects of their narcissistic relationships. Social networks and spirituality were the most frequent sources of resilience. The present paper contributes new understandings of narcissistic relationships as a common type of toxic relationship in Egypt.

*Keywords:* Narcissism, Resilience of women, Toxic relationships, Domestic Abuse, Egypt

### **Introduction**

According to ancient Greek mythology, Narcissus thought he was impossibly handsome. One of his lovers was a beautiful nymph named Echo. She tried to show herself to Narcissus when he was hunting and attempted to embrace him; however, he pushed her away and broke her heart. Narcissus continued his search for his perfect partner and eventually fell in love with his own reflection in water. This myth illuminates that Narcissus was a self-centered and self-absorbed man who neglected others (Lam, 2012; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008).

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In current terms, narcissism is understood as a human trait measured on a continuum ranging from healthy and genuine self-esteem to severe, self-admiring pathology. Healthy narcissism refers to an individual's ability to experience all types of emotions and display empathy. Therefore, healthy narcissism relies on true self-esteem that is absent in a pathological narcissist (Hotchkiss, 2005; Määttä et al., 2012). Narcissism becomes a disorder when it negatively affects social relationships (Määttä et al., 2012). According to the American Psychological Association (APA) (2000), "narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is labeled as a pattern of grandiosity (sense of importance), poor empathy, and search for appreciation, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts." The term narcissism also suggests extreme degrees of self-admiration and self-importance (Joutsiniemi et al., 2007; Määttä et al., 2012).

Healthy relationships involve reciprocal caring, empathy, respect, shared decision-making, and a deep and mutual interest in eliciting happiness (Solferino & Tessitore, 2019), while narcissism is thought to provoke a toxic relationship (Green & Charles, 2019). Toxic relationships are usually characterized by insecurity, self-centeredness, and dominance and may involve psychological and physical violence (Solferino & Tessitore, 2019) and nonreciprocal affiliations (Geist, 2009; Määttä et al., 2012). Narcissists may appear attractive and exciting in the first stages of a relationship; however, their toxic and self-absorbed behaviors are eventually revealed over time (Green & Charles, 2019). Victims of narcissistic partners can experience symptoms like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): undesirable thoughts, feelings of loneliness, isolation, withdrawal, feeling overwhelmed, loss of emotional control, and lack of self-worth (Määttä et al., 2012).

Some researchers have noted that the narcissistic personality resembles very highly the masculine role stereotypes of men in some cultures (e.g., Egyptian culture), including aggressiveness, a need for power, control, and an authoritative style (Corry et al., 2008). Furthermore, the prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder is greater for men (7.7%) than it is for women (4.8%) (Stinson et al., 2008). Consequently, there are indications that men tend to be more narcissistic than women (Grijalva et al., 2014). Thus, the current study will focus on women who were victimized by narcissistic partners, with a focus on Egypt. Egypt is a patriarchal country that moderately favors masculinity and presents a low gender egalitarianism score (Elsaid & Elsaid, 2012; Shousha, 2020; Yaya et al., 2019). As Hofstede (2011) argues, "in masculine communities, men are expected to be independent, assertive, control-oriented, ambitious, dominant, and competitive; women are expected to be supportive, caring for others, nurturing, and dependent." Additionally, Egyptian society strongly endorses male stereotypes from early childhood, which exerts an immense impact on the beliefs and values of men and affects the patterns of their relationships with women (Shousha, 2020). However, several women often manifest the adverse impact of such toxic relationships through behaviors such as drug abuse, binge-eating, suicide, depression (Gopal & Nunlall, 2017), and other mental and physical health consequences (Anderson, Lynette & Danis, 2013).

Previously conducted studies have examined toxic relationships and violence against women; however, only a few have focused on the resilience of victims, which serves as a source of strength in stressful experiences after they end such relationships (Cordero, 2014; Gopal & Nunlall, 2017). Resilience is viewed as a protective attribute in individuals, akin to traits such as self-esteem and independence. Resilience can also be noticed through an individual's environment in the form of a supportive family or strong social ties that encourage women to return to a sense of wellbeing after a relationship with a narcissist (Gopal & Nunlall, 2017).

Overall, there seems to be evidence to indicate that women are more victimized within toxic relationships than men, particularly in masculine cultures. There are few studies that address the victim's resilience after leaving the narcissist. Hence, the current study offers some important insights into the issues related to victims of narcissism in Egypt and their sources of resilience.

## **Literature Review**

### *Narcissistic Traits*

Individuals with narcissistic personalities have a superiority complex, are self-absorbed, self-centered, lack empathy, and often use sex for physical pleasure rather than emotional intimacy. Further, narcissistic individuals are usually unable to experience love for others or feel a sense of commitment in close relationships (Campbell & Miller, 2011).

From a clinical perspective, an extreme form of narcissism is considered as NPD (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Individuals with NPD evince a grandiose sense of self-esteem. They may seek appreciation and admiration from others but display a diminished sense of empathy. Narcissism is viewed as a continuum ranging from healthy self-absorption to severe, pathological self-admiration; hence, some traits associated with NPD are also applicable to individuals who are not diagnosed with this disorder (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Hotchkiss, 2005; Lam, 2012; Määttä et al., 2012). Individuals with high levels of narcissism tend to possess an overly positive self-concept (Rose, 2002) and exhibit excessive egotism (self-centeredness) (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). They tend to perceive themselves as unique individuals (Emmons, 1984), who are more creative and attractive than others, and more knowledgeable than they are in real terms (Paulhus et al., 2003). They are also usually overconfident about their skills, seek attention (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), struggle to maintain an image in front of other people, and may display extreme responses such as hostility and aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 2002). They become defensive in the face of criticism, try to impress others, are willing to take advantage of people, and often fantasize about their control and success (Campbell & Foster, 2002).

Several studies on personality traits have revealed that narcissistic traits could predispose individuals toward criminality. Scholars have found that lack of empathy is the main predictor of offending behavior by narcissists (Blinkhorn et al., 2016; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Green & Charles, 2019). Some studies have also shown that narcissistic traits are linked to intimate partner abuse (Hamberger & Hastings 1990; Lam, 2012) and domestic violence (Lam, 2012; Simmons et al. 2005).

### *Intimate Relationships with Narcissists*

According to Žvelc (2010), social relationships may be subject-focused or object-focused. A subject-focused relationship may be described as a close affiliation that permits partners to treat each other with respect and fulfill individual desires and interests. Conversely, one partner in an object-focused relationship is perceived and treated as an object intended to satisfy the other partner's interests and needs (Määttä et al., 2012). Narcissistic individuals often view their romantic partners as "objects" for their self-enhancement as they can only focus on themselves (Foster & Campbell, 2005). Furthermore, the narcissist is also likely to be easily triggered into undertaking aggressive actions in relationships wherein the other partner is perceived as an object (Žvelc, 2010).

In this context, Freud (1957) claimed that narcissists in love turn this emotion toward the self and cannot love others. This tendency manifests itself in neglect toward their partners and a lack of intimacy in their interpersonal relationships. In comparison, non-narcissists direct their

love toward their partners (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Campbell (1999) has described three characteristics of narcissistic intimate relationships: attention-seeking, lack of caring and intimacy, and pursuit of self-enhancement. According to this view, the narcissist values excellence and perfection more than care and love from their intimate partner. Additionally, the narcissist is more attracted to a partner who offers the potential to improve the self.

Empirical studies conducted on narcissistic traits have claimed that highly narcissistic individuals play a negative and abusive role in intimate relationships (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Green & Charles, 2019). Kjærviik and Bushman's (2021) meta-analytic review has indicated that narcissism is associated with all types of aggression: indirect, direct, physical, verbal, and bullying. It is thus clarified that narcissists are prone to aggression toward their partners when they are provoked. Moreover, narcissists have been found to use gaslighting as their most favored psychological control tactic for their intimate partners. This domineering behavior can cause extensive long-term psychological effects as abusive partners can successfully make their victims appear mentally unstable and undermine their sense of reality (Sweet, 2019). Moreover, narcissistic people exhibit low levels of commitment (Campbell & Miller, 2011; McNulty & Widman, 2014; Green & Charles, 2019), take a game-playing and manipulative approach to close relationships (Campbell et al., 2002), and exhibit domestic violence (Blinkhorn et al., 2016; Green & Charles, 2019) to punish, hurt, or frighten an intimate partner (Keller et al., 2014; Green & Charles, 2019). Extant research has also demonstrated that narcissists tend to consider alternative potential intimate partners, flirt with people other than their partners, and seek attention from others (Campbell & Foster 2002; Lam, 2012). Focusing on the Middle East, studies show that women in these regions are socially conditioned to believe that intimate partner violence against them is justified and acceptable, and that they are partially responsible for such abuse from their partner (Boy & Kulczycki, 2008; Yaya et al, 2019; Yount et al., 2014). In Egypt, women aged 15 to 49 years have experienced sexual and/or physical violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime (El-Zanaty and Associates, 2015). Yaya et al (2019) showed that almost one third of married Egyptian women have experienced intimate partner violence, including physical (26.7%), emotional (17.8%), and sexual violence (4.6%).

### *The Resilience of Victims*

Resilience is defined as “patterns of desirable behaviors in situations where adaptive functioning or development have been significantly threatened by adverse experiences” (Masten et al. 1995, p. 283). Liu et al.'s (2017) multi-system model delineates three intertwined factors of resilience: intra-individual, interpersonal, and socio-ecological/external factors. Intra-individual comprises personal traits; interpersonal combines social bonds with family, friends, and personal experiences; and the last factor relates to issues such as governance, access to services, and socioeconomic status. Additionally, resilience may encompass environmental/physical, spiritual, social/emotional, and cognitive attributes. Environmental/physical aspects include housing, physical health, and nutrition. Spiritual features represent an individual's understanding of the meaning of life. Social ties and support systems denote social attributes. Finally, cognitive elements may be manifested in mindsets, such as the adoption of an optimistic explanatory view of personal struggles (Hatala, 2011).

Previously conducted studies on toxic relationships have suggested that victims require emotional, physical, and psychological support from external sources. Such sources can help victims recover, circumvent a return to abusive partners, and reduce the risk of re-victimization (Cordero, 2014; Gopal & Nunlall, 2017). Some scholars reported that external support can play a



crucial role in women's resilience (Gopal & Nunlall, 2017). On that note, Crawford et al.'s (2009) found that women reported that the social and emotional support they received from their families and friends was crucial in helping them cope with the continued difficulties of victimhood, especially after leaving their abusive partners. Potter (2007) also found that spirituality exercised an impact on the resilience of women; it accorded women the strength to leave their abusive relationships and helped them survive and recover after separation. The evidence discussed above leads to the three primary objectives of the present research: a) to address the nature of experiences of Egyptian women encountered in their narcissistic relationships; and b) to determine the sources of their resilience after they had left their narcissistic partners; and c) to identify the most important sources of resilience.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

The present study adopted a qualitative approach, which was deemed appropriate for the collection of plentiful, detailed information about the experiences and perceptions of respondents, especially concerning such a sensitive topic (Fox, Hunn, & Mathers, 2002; Elise, 2018; Mutch, 2005). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with respondents. The semi-structured approach requires active and effective listening on the part of the interviewer. It was selected as it offered the respondents the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences (Green & Charles, 2019). An interview manual (see the appendix) was prepared based on a literature review and the interests of the participants. Broad, open, and close-ended questions were asked to ascertain the women's experiences during the course of their narcissistic relationships and to probe the sources of their resilience after they left their partners. Although a deductive approach was adopted in the analysis, which is driven by the previous theories and empirical research, the interview process allowed for new or alternative themes and concepts to emerge throughout the interviews, because the current study is the first focused on Egyptian women in narcissistic relationships.

### *Sample and Data Collection Procedures*

Considering the nature of this study, a purposive sample was selected based on its relevance to the study topic. The inclusion criteria specified women who perceived themselves to be involved in a marital relationship with a narcissist for at least one year. This duration was stipulated as problems may not become apparent in the early phases of a relationship with a narcissist (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Elise, 2018). A total of 27 literate Egyptian women aged between 24 and 54 years volunteered as participants for this study (Table 1). The participants were found via private Facebook groups such as Victims of Narcissists (63.1K members) and Let's Come Home (14.225 followers).<sup>2</sup> The researcher contacted them directly and asked them if they wanted to participate in the research project. Before the interview process, the researcher utilized the previously mentioned criteria for narcissistic traits to verify that the participants were in a relationship with a narcissist. Finally, 24 interviews were conducted online using Facebook Messenger through video calls. Chats were also utilized for further clarification, and three rounds of face-to-face interviews were performed. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic. Before participation, participants reviewed the consent form and were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary. Respondents were informed that their responses would be used only for scientific purposes and that they would

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of recruitment.

remain anonymous. The participants were also apprised that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and the researcher attempted to accord them a safe and comfortable space in which they could share their experiences.

Age	Range (24–54 years) M = 35.55 years, SD = 8.33 years
Education level	
High school	11.11%
Bachelor	55.56%
Postgraduate (Diploma, Master's, Ph.D.)	33.33%
Duration of relationship	M = 6.44 years, SD = 6.05 years
Employed	66.67%
Unemployed	3.33%

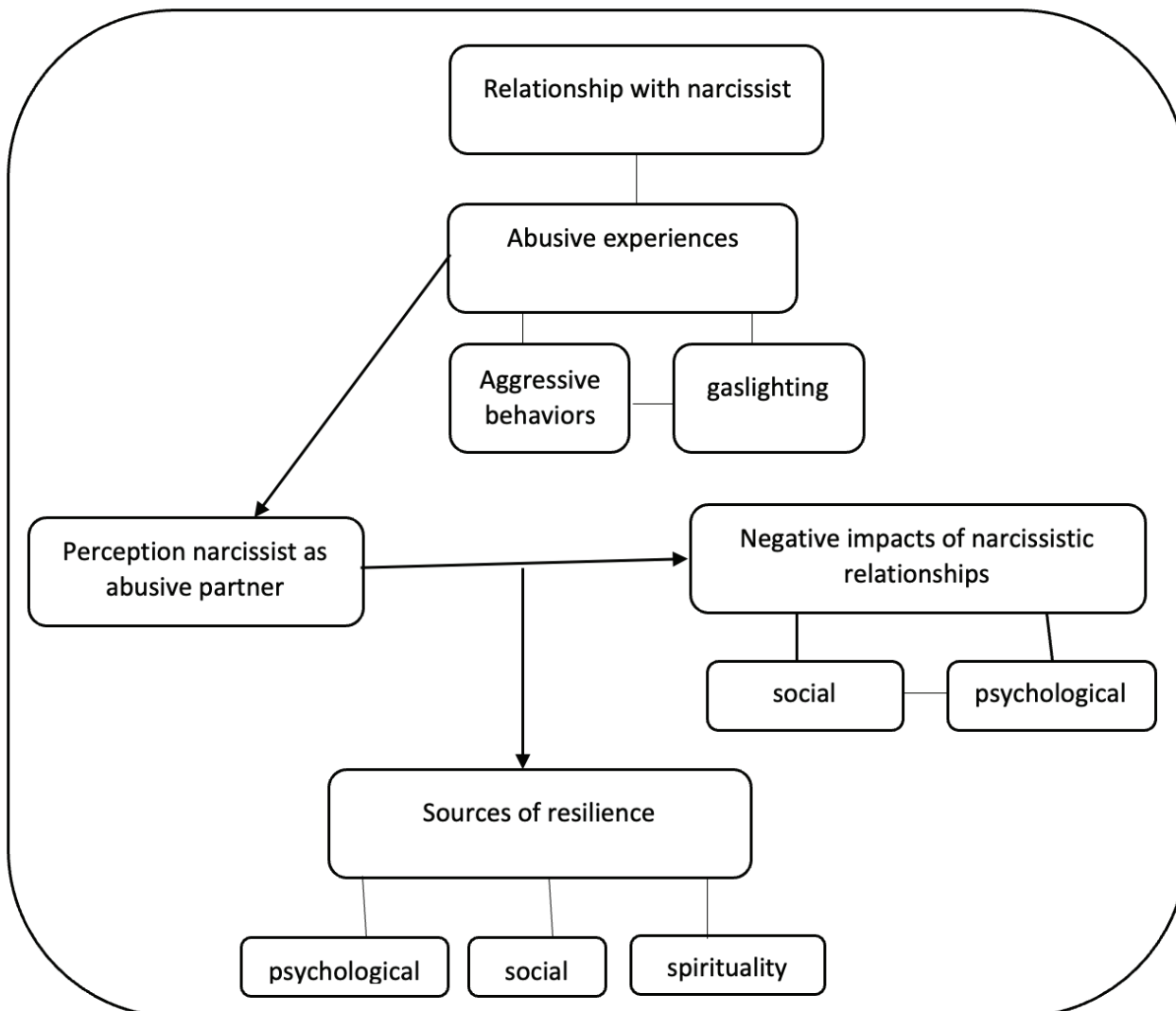
### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the responses of women and to identify the principal themes within their answers. Thematic analysis is a method of organizing and sorting data, reporting themes, and interpreting numerous aspects of the topic of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elise, 2018). The thematic analysis and inferences obtained in this study were separately verified by two researchers to ensure objectivity. The researchers adopted six guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) as follows: familiarization with the data, generating initial ideas, searching for broader themes and sub-themes, reviewing themes and sub-themes, defining themes; and generating the results of the analysis. The analysis was started with multiple readings of the interview transcripts, then followed by highlighting to identify the initial codes which were of relevance to the main issues raised in the literature review. After the coding step, the codes were sorted into potential themes. These steps required the researcher to review the gathered extracts for each theme and consider whether they appeared to form coherent patterns, then each theme would be defined and named by identifying its essence, and aspects of data encapsulated by each theme would be determined. The final analysis was produced, and the results were inscribed along with the inferences generated from the thematic analysis using a deductive approach (theory-driven). According to Braun & Clarke (2006), a deductive approach is more analyst-driven, as it is closely linked to the researcher's theoretical background and study topic.

### **Results**

The analysis yielded four main themes from the conducted interviews: a) the abusive experiences suffered by the women, b) the perception of the narcissist as an abusive partner, c) the negative impact of the narcissistic relationship, and d) women's sources of resilience after quitting this relationship (see Figure 1: Thematic map). The section that follows describes details of each theme and highlights parts of the narratives offered by respondents.

**Figure 1: Thematic Map.** A thematic map was constructed to enable visualization between the main themes and sub-themes, which were generated from the coding process.



*The Abusive Experiences Endured by Partners of Narcissists*

This theme captured diverse aspects of narcissistic abuse and manipulation reported by women during their relationships. The women’s experiences were categorized under two subthemes: aggressive behaviors and gaslighting. Most of the respondents reported encountering discrete types of aggression: physical, psychological, and verbal. The quotes noted below exemplify aggressive behavior displayed by the narcissistic partner toward the respondent women:

My narcissistic husband always beats me, teases me, insults me, and threatens me. Sometimes he breaks my favorite possessions without any feelings of regret or sorrow.



When he wanted to punish me, he used to humiliate me by threatening me with divorce. He used to tell me that I have to do everything by abiding by his rules. He never asked me about my opinion and if I tried to say what I think, he insulted me and told me “Do I look interested in knowing your opinion?!”

My husband called me by undesirable names such as “Stupid” and “Disgusting Bitch.”

He never said sorry, and he always hurts me intentionally. He feels victorious when I burst into tears or get upset. Also, he tried to ruin my reputation.

The gaslighting subtheme dealt with forms of emotional abuse that involved manipulating the women by forcing them to question their thoughts, feelings, memories, and experience of events, to the point that they began doubting their rationality (Green & Charles, 2019; Stern, 2018). Gaslighting is defined as a type of psychological abuse intended to make one's partner in an intimate relationship feel mentally unstable and irrational. It creates a surreal interpersonal environment that has attracted considerable public attention (Sweet, 2019). More than half of the participants reported being at the receiving end of some form of gaslighting by their ex-partners. One reported:

When I found out some sexual chats with other girls on his mobile phone, I asked him about these chats. He told me, “You should see a doctor because you are hallucinating. I would never cheat on you. I love you and respect you.” I actually believed him. He made me believe I was wrong. He seemed so honest.

The notion that women are emotional, irrational, sensitive, and dependent on their intuition are key ideas used by abusive partners. The victimized women are often accused of being insane, irrational, and childish (Sweet, 2019), as exemplified in the following quote:

He never admits he is wrong. All the time he blames me for everything. He used to say that women are responsible for any problem when it happens and that it is men who solve it. He always despised me.

#### *Women's Perception of the Narcissist as Abusive Partner*

The second theme demonstrated the opinions of women about the traits displayed by their narcissistic partners. Almost all the participants reported that their ex-partners exhibited selfishness, lack of empathy, self-centeredness, self-importance, manipulative tendencies, abusive tendencies, envy, or the belief that others envied them because they were unique and special. The respondents also described their ex-partners as overly critical, great actors, attention-seekers, demons, vampires, dominants, infallible, liars, exploitative, noncommittal, neglectful, aggressive, cheaters, and two-faced.

#### *The Negative Impact of the Narcissistic Relationship*

The third theme deals with the psychological and social effects of such relationships. Almost all participants reported the adverse effects of their relationships with narcissistic men, especially after leaving the relationship. In the aftermath of these relationships, the women

became acutely aware that they had been victims of abuse. This realization, in turn, had a negative psychological and social impact on most of the participants. “When he left me, I felt devastated and utterly useless,” reported one respondent. Another participant said, “After leaving him, I felt depressed and lost my sense of self-esteem. I always blame myself and am so afraid of what tomorrow may bring.” One woman confessed, “I lost my trust in people and feel that all men are unworthy of my trust.” Another victim asserted, “I lost my appetite. I get panic attacks when I see him.” Yet another woman reported, “I decided to withdraw and stopped communicating with people. I am so scared to get married again and be a victim to another narcissist.”

Further, several participants testified that these effects lasted between six months and a year after they quit their relationships. Subsequently, they recovered completely. Conversely, some other participants felt they had not recovered from the negative effects of their relationship and were often forced (due to shared children or shared business matters) to revisit the trauma they had experienced in dealing with their ex-partners.

#### *The Sources of Resilience for Women After They Quit Their Relationship*

The fourth theme encapsulated different ways in which the women found resilience and rebuilt themselves after they left their abusive partners. Some participants required psychological aid from professionals, while others found strength from their social networks and/or spirituality. The remaining participants regained their sense of self by improving their skills and abilities. As one noted, “Being surrounded by my family and friends helped me a lot in forgetting the abusive relationship. They always support me. This is something I missed when I was with him. He never felt for me (or had any empathy for me).” Similarly, as described by another woman:

I tried to get to know new people, tried not to be alone, and read books, reminding myself all the time that I made the right decision. I escaped. I am trying to find my love for life, to sleep well, and accept myself with no regret or blame. My best therapy is to get him out of my life for good, not getting in touch with him ever again. I am trying to get close to God and accept how things turned out to be. This helps me accept my life.

Almost all participants agreed that their lives had become better without their ex-partners, as illustrated in the following quotes. Another participant mentioned, “I am now focused on my work. I started to go back to my PhD studies and restore my self-confidence.” Another woman said, “I started to take courses on life-coaching,” and another reported, “I am reading books and watching videos about narcissism. This helps me greatly to understand and get back to my life.”

#### **Discussion**

The importance of focusing on the survivors of toxic relationships has been indicated in the scholarly literature; however, Arabian research initiatives, especially in Egypt, have not yet focused on such sensitive topics. The findings of this study are consistent with previously conducted empirical studies on abusive relationships with narcissists and the negative effects of such intimate affiliations (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Green & Charles, 2019; Žvelc, 2010). People with high narcissistic traits have been found to be associated with spousal abuse (Hamberger & Hastings 1990; Lam, 2012), domestic violence, and hostility (Lam, 2012; Kjærviik & Bushman, 2021). The findings of this study provide further evidence that relationships with narcissists cause distress and trauma in victims (Määttä et al., 2012; Green & Charles, 2019).

The current findings are also congruent with the results obtained by Määttä et al. (2012), who reported that intimate relationships with narcissists tend to be destructive.

The participants also shared their negative experiences as victims of aggression by their ex-partners and reported several instances of gaslighting. In this line, Stern (2018) designated three stages of gaslighting and asserted that all three stages might not occur sequentially. The first stage is the instigation of disbelief in one's mental capabilities. This stage can cause anxiety and confusion in the victim. The second stage of defense evokes the self-protective urge to seek evidence to prove the gaslighter wrong and attempt to debate one's sanity. Finally, the third stage of depression occurs after several arguments with the gaslighter. In this state, the victim tries to prove that the gaslighter is right and acts in a manner that would win his approval. At this stage, the victim is exhausted and feels unable to access her true self. The phenomenon of gaslighting thus describes the manipulative tactics used by abusive individuals (Sweet, 2019). In addition, current findings also support the theory that individuals with high narcissistic traits have difficulties with long-term commitments and exhibit a lack of empathy (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Green & Charles, 2019). Women in this study perceived their narcissistic partners as demons, cheaters, attention-seekers, and manipulators.

These findings can be explained by the fact that narcissistic partners often view their intimate companions as objects rather than subjects due to their grandiose sense of themselves (Foster & Campbell, 2005). Additionally, narcissists appear incapable of caring and loving their partners (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Consequently, this explains why narcissists tend to seek attention from more than one intimate partner at the same time (Campbell & Foster 2002; Lam, 2012).

The current study suggests that the cultural factor plays a crucial role, given the prevalence of a toxic masculine culture in Egypt; this cultural environment requires men to be dominant, aggressive, strong, and controlling (Hofstede, 2011; Shousha, 2020; Soares et al., 2007). In Egypt, there is a common belief that men are superior to women, and thus women deserve to be abused (Yaya et al., 2019). Alternatively, women are expected to be supportive, submissive, dependent, and caring (Hofstede, 2011; Shousha, 2020; Soares et al., 2007). This prevalence is also explained by the power-unequal intimate relationships that characterize patriarchal and sexist cultures. Women do not have cultural, economic, and political capital in such cultures (Sweet, 2019). Additionally, in the patriarchal culture of Egypt, sexism and gender inequality have been found to contribute to these beliefs that justify abuse toward women (Shousha, 2020; Yaya et al., 2019; Yount, 2011). Consequently, women are more vulnerable to victimization by toxic masculinity in Egypt. Similarly, toxic masculinity can perhaps also elucidate why narcissism appears to be more common in men than in women (Grijalva et al., 2014; Pullen & Rhodes, 2008) and why narcissists have higher self-esteem and show higher sensation-seeking behaviors (Grijalva et al., 2014) as compared to non-narcissists.

The findings of this study about women's resilience in the aftermath of their relationships with narcissistic partners are congruent with the extant literature. Almost all the participants of the current study agreed that they needed time to recover fully from these relationships and to restore their self-esteem. The findings also demonstrated that women had recourse to internal (self-enhancement) and/or external (social networks) sources of strength. Further, these findings align with literature suggesting that resilience involves intra-individual factors (personal traits) and interpersonal attributes (engaging in relationships with others) (Liu et al., 2017). Moreover, many respondents reported seeking external help (e.g., family, friends, new people) to recover after the abusive relationship, and this result is consistent with previous investigations that have

demonstrated the incremental value of external resources of resilience (Hatala, 2011; Gopal & Nunlall, 2017). Hyland (2014) has asserted that the lack of external resources (e.g., family, friends, and community support) may explain why some women remain in abusive relationships. In addition, Yntiso et al. (2014) have shown that caring family members are perceived as inspirational for their help and advice. So, external validation, such as the presence of support groups that gather survivors of similar experiences or offer psychological assistance and other such resources, may also benefit victims of such toxic relationships.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the present research contributes to the extant literature on relationships with narcissists in the Egyptian context, it has four limitations. First, the sample design of the research (purposive sample) limits the generalization of results. In other words, the results may not be applicable to all Egyptian women. Second, the current research overlooked several demographic factors (e.g., educational level, accommodation area, social class, and religion), which may decrease or increase sources of resilience and the impact of such relationships on victims. Third, the current study did not endeavor to analyze the differences in experiences between men and women victims of a relationship with a narcissist. Fourth, there is a possibility of participant bias, because of the participants' desire to share their abusive experiences with an expert. So, it is recommended to use the exploratory sequential design as a type of mixed-methods design to guarantee more objective results. It starts with collecting and analyzing qualitative data (phase 1) followed by quantitative data (phase 2).

### **Conclusion**

A relationship with a narcissist is considered a type of toxic relationship characterized by insecurity, self-centeredness, and dominance. Such destructive affiliations may also involve psychological and physical violence. However, the topic of toxic narcissistic intimacy has not been adequately examined in Middle Eastern scholarly literature, especially in Egypt. The paucity of research initiatives on this subject can be attributed to the prevailing masculinist cultural ethos of the region. The current study demonstrated that victims of narcissists perceive them as demons, vampires, pretenders, liars, aggressors, and abusers. The findings also revealed that relationships with narcissists psychologically scar women and often compel them to question their sanity. Finally, the study disclosed that women can recover from such traumatic associations, although healing may take a long time. Furthermore, women in such abusive relationships have several ways to recover and rebuild themselves through external and/or internal resources. Accordingly, it is time for the Egyptian community to start supporting women victimized by toxic masculinity, avoid blaming women for the damage incurred by such relationships, and to avoid stigmatizing women who resort to divorce to escape. The Egyptian community needs to reassess gender stereotypes in Egypt, support women to refuse domestic partner abuse, and strengthen women's sources of resilience.

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### **Appendix: Interview Manual**

- 1) Describe your ex-partner.
- 2) Did you experience any abuse by your ex-partner? Please describe these abusive behaviors. If you answered yes, why do you think your ex-partner acted in the abusive manner you have described?
- 3) Did you experience any aggression from your ex-partner?  
If so, please describe the types of aggression you experienced.
- 4) How would you describe the impact of this relationship after you left it?
- 5) For how long did you still feel an emotional connection with your ex-partner?
- 6) What steps did you take to become stronger after quitting the relationship?