

Original Article

## Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Exploration of Lived Experiences of Men

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant public health and human rights issue affecting all genders. IPV is overwhelmingly prevalent among women, but it is being increasingly acknowledged that men, too, are IPV victims.

**Objectives:** This study draws on the lived experiences of ever-married men to explore the various forms and effects of IPV experienced by them from their female partners within the ambit of heterosexual marriages.

**Material and Methods:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 ever-married men with a history of having experienced domestic violence from their female partners to reveal the different forms of IPV and how it affected their lives.

**Results:** Findings suggest the prevalence of physical, emotional, and financial abuse affecting men's health and financial well-being in myriad ways. Social norms inhibit men from seeking support due to fear of being targets of social ridicule. In addition, skewed legislative measures in favor of women work against the provision of justice to men.

**Conclusion:** The study adds to the growing body of work on IPV being pervasive among men. It highlights delayed help-seeking behavior among men due to misplaced notions of gendered behavior and identifies the acknowledgment of IPV among men as a social problem to being the first step to its effective redressal.

**Keywords:** Intimate partner violence, Violence against men, Qualitative research, Types and effects of violence, Compensating mechanisms

### INTRODUCTION WITH OBJECTIVES

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects about a third of women across the globe, making it a widespread global health issue of immediate concern.<sup>1</sup> While the burden of IPV is borne by women, it is being increasingly acknowledged that men, too, are victims of IPV.<sup>2</sup> IPV is prevalent among men in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships (Hogan, 2020). It is estimated that the prevalence of IPV in men varied from 7.3% to 32% during their lifetime and 0.6–29.3% for a 12-month timeframe.<sup>3</sup> An average lifetime prevalence of IPV in men perpetrated by their female partner was estimated at about 21.7% based on a review of 91 articles.<sup>2</sup> About 9.5% of men in the USA have experienced some sort of sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime.<sup>4</sup> In China, nearly one-fifth of men had ever been hit by their current partner.<sup>5</sup> Closer home, in a community-based study in Haryana, the prevalence of IPV among married men in

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the age group of 21–49 years was found to be 52.4%, with unemployment or lower family income and addiction of the perpetrator being significant reasons for violence.<sup>6</sup>

Violence is gendered, with men usually seen as perpetrators and women as victims.<sup>7</sup> Socially constructed rigid gender roles affect the way society perceives violence and regulate the responses accordingly. With obliviousness surrounding men as IPV victims, the response to them remains inadequate. It also affects the way men and women perceive their own status as IPV victims in a starkly different manner. However, the health and economic costs of violence affect both of them equally in discrete, disparate ways. Yet, the complete disregard of men as victims of IPV by their own selves and by society delays recognition of the consequences and appropriate response mechanisms. Consequences of IPV may include physical injury, functional disorders, emotional distress, depression, anxiety, phobia, suicidal thoughts and tendencies, negative sexual and reproductive outcomes, and even death.

The most common form of violence against men was emotional, followed by physical<sup>6</sup> compared to women, who were significantly more likely than men to experience physical or sexual IPV.<sup>8</sup> More than 78% of IPV among men was psychological in nature.<sup>8</sup> Medical expenditures, lower wages resulting from missed work, job loss, or alimony payment drain economic resources. Social gendered (mis) understanding of violence does not conceptualize men as IPV victims. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity prevents men from disclosing their abuse to others, delaying aid and assistance.

A growing body of research demonstrates the victimization of men due to violence perpetrated by partners in intimate relationships. Nevertheless, few studies have been undertaken that make inquiries into the lives of men who have been abused by their wives,<sup>9</sup> with a particularly significant paucity in Indian literature. This inadequate understanding of IPV against men leads to the formulation of measures that can be unfair to men. Thus, this paper attempts to explore the experiences of men in married heterosexual relationships who encountered violence at the hands of their female partners.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

A qualitative study was designed to gain a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of a male victim of IPV and the real-life context in which the violence occurred. The qualitative approach was best suited to provide rich details of how the men describe the subjective experiences of the abuse and the impact that it has on them. The present study was conducted in areas in and around Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal.

Ever married men who had contacted a legal organization with reference to violence in which the perpetrator was the wife were contacted. The men were made aware of the purpose of the study along with the provisions of strict privacy and confidentiality, and only ten men agreed to participate in the study initially since the research topic is a sensitive issue and a lot of shame/secretcy is attached to it. Face to face in-depth interviews were conducted with the 10 participants in a safe location mutually agreeable to the participant and researcher. The participants were asked to share their accounts of violence centering on physical, emotional, financial, and sexual IPV. They were also asked to reflect on the experiences that they underwent when they sought help to address the IPV issue. These men then shared the information of other men in similar situations who could be contacted for the purpose of the study. Five men agreed to be interviewed. Thus, both purposive and snowball sampling were used for this study.

The proceedings were recorded in all cases after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The recordings were transcribed, and the data analysis involved thematic content coding. An initial list of broad thematic codes based on the research questions was prepared, and the transcripts were then broad-coded according to thematic content.

## RESULTS

Data analysis in the present study led to the interpretation of the lives of the participants in terms of the different forms of IPV that impact their lives in direct and indirect ways and the ways in which the men have tried to cope with it.

### “Sleeping with her was like lying beside a poisonous snake in the same bed:” Forms and effects of IPV

IPV against men can take on many forms: physical, emotional, sexual, and threatening behavior, and they overlap each other. All the participants had been physically and verbally abused by their spouses at some point. Throwing things, physically attacking, and some cases, instigating the man into fighting back were common. As one respondent described his ordeal;

*“I was hit by a hot frying pan. I still have the cut mark in my hip region. She tried to make me hit her so that she could lodge criminal charges against me. But I am an educated person and restrained myself from retaliation. Her sole intention was to pressurize me by means of violent acts to have the deed of the flat. Though she was from an affluent business family, she still longed for monetary benefits.”*

Only in one case did the participant divulge the sexual abuse that he underwent, which for him was very painful to divulge because it filled him with shame and disgust.

*“One night, when I was sleeping, my wife suddenly grabbed my private parts and hurt them badly. Sleeping beside her was like lying with a poisonous snake in the same bed. The abuse continued; it was not yet complete. She even thrashed me with the heels of her shoes. I am still undergoing eye treatment for this. Moreover, 1 day, she bit my lips so hard that it was bleeding profusely. You can see the bite mark here.”*

Verbal threats of abuse, in isolation as well as in company (in a public place, in front of in-laws and relatives), were reported by all the participants. Willful neglect was another form of abuse reported by some. As one respondent reported, his wife threw away his dishes when he sat down for dinner one night after returning from the office. The whole night, he was barred from eating anything.

Pushing, shoving, and slapping the elderly in-laws were some of the tactics used by some of the wives to punish their husbands. The physical acts of violence committed by the wives against the parents of the husbands translated into mental harassment for the husbands. In one case, the wife threw a sharp chopper at his mother; fortunately, it missed the target narrowly. That night itself, the respondent's mother was admitted to a hospital with a panic attack and was in a serious state for 2 days. In another case, the victim's mother was pushed against the wall by the daughter-in-law. In these cases, the parents-in-law were mostly viewed by the wives as a siphon on the husband's limited income, and the violent acts against them by the wives were meant to intimidate the husbands into submission to the wishes of the wives. In some cases, the abuse was not limited to the wife only but also from her side of the family. In some cases, instead of diffusing the situation between the couple, the wife's family questioned their masculinity and manhood. One respondent shared that he was traumatized to learn that his father-in-law had directly asked his mother – “*why do you and your son sleep together?*” alluding to an incestuous relationship.

Constant abusive behavior takes a toll on the health of the victims. Cuts, bruises, and concussions were the commonly reported physical injuries. Depression, anxiety, fatigue, headaches, lack of sleep, nausea, suicidal thoughts and tendencies, and post-traumatic stress disorder were some of the mental health issues most commonly present in the accounts of the interviewees. Substance abuse and alcohol addiction were used by some to “*numb their senses.*” Irregular food habits, insomnia, indiscriminate use of sleeping pills, and regular drinking triggered gastrointestinal disorders in these cases. A respondent stated,

*“I have been addicted to heavy drinking and chain smoking from the day my wife left me as I could not fulfill her demands. Addiction helps me to face and fight this situation. I am in an acute depressive state. I have spent many sleepless nights with panic attacks and anxiety. Every single day, I was in constant fear*

*of getting arrested under criminal charges filed by my wife under Sec 498A and Sec 12 (Sec 498A is the act against the cruelty of wives by their husbands, and Sec 12 is the Domestic Violence Act). I got out of my locality and took shelter in a relative's house.”*

Another participant reiterated that he did not want to live this life, which was full of disgrace. He confessed that he had even tried to kill himself, but the attempt failed.

Violence in any form affects the mental state. When the family members of the abused person are also included in the abusive cycle, it creates additional stress for the man as well as his family. In the case of the respondent accused of an incestuous relationship with his mother, the victim's mother was in a state of depression and had almost stopped talking to her son, husband, and others. The incident had occurred a year ago, but she was still taking medicines and went for regular counseling sessions with the psychiatrist. In another case of extreme deterioration of the mental state of the father of an IPV victim because of the constant verbal abuse by his daughter-in-law, he ventured into the road, oblivious to the traffic, got hit by a car, and injured himself.

The health issues require regular check-ups, outpatient department visits, hospital admissions, and visits to counselors and mental health professionals. These out-of-pocket health expenditures for both themselves and their family members are a drain on the men's financial resources. Again, mental diseases have not received insurance coverage for a long time, plus outcomes due to abuse of alcohol and drugs are exempted from insurance policies.

IPV has direct financial effects, too. One of the respondents stated that he had lost his first job due to his long-term absence from the workplace due to marital conflicts on a daily basis. Another victim, a government employee, stated that because he is a government employee, he did not lose his job due to absenteeism but was in a constant state of fear of losing it if he was jailed under 498A, which affects his work quality. Consultation with lawyers and legal proceedings on a regular basis lead to legal expenditures, which put financial pressure on the men. Almost all of the respondents stated that they are giving interim maintenance of Rs 5000–Rs 10,000 as per their ability. It is a huge sum for people who have lower incomes. Payment of hefty alimony is also a financial crunch. Alimony of Rs 5–10 lakhs has also been demanded by the wives in some cases. In some cases, the men had to spend money on bailing themselves or family members out of jail. In addition to the financial loss, it leads to loss of face in the society adding to the ill health of the victims.

### **Undoing the damage: Coping strategies**

In the initial days of discord, the men chose to ignore and bear with the problem by keeping everything bottled up.

They did not share it with their close ones (family or friends) at the very beginning of their turbulent days. When probed further, the response was;

*“As a man, it is not easy for us to share these things with anyone. Women have it better than us since society expects them to be victims and is ready with compassionate words and legal measures. For men, it is expected that they should be able to control their wives. If a man exposes that his wife abuses him, both physically and emotionally, he becomes the laughingstock of the town. Which man wants that? So we try everything to keep it under wraps.”*

When asked whether the respondents sought any help from the police or others, many reported that due to self-pride and fear of being a subject of mockery, they did not report their cases initially. Coping with IPV involves mental and monetary support from parents, relatives, and friends. In some cases, support came from unexpected sources. One of the respondents stated that he got both monetary and mental support from the relatives of his wife. His wife’s maternal uncle and his wife helped him overcome his turbulent days and even arranged for a lawyer to consult legal issues. In another case, the respondent got support from his wife’s friends.

Some of the men even sought professional help. For one respondent, the counseling was lifesaving;

*“The counselor helped me a lot to come out from the depression because my wife had charged me with Sec 498A. I had to undergo a full month’s session of counseling to cope with the emotional setback. He is like a friend to me now.”*

It was only when the violence went beyond their tolerable limits, and they had exhausted all options that the men opted for legal course. The majority of them found recounting the IPV incidents in front of the lawyers a humiliating ordeal. All the men admitted feelings of disgrace that swept over them when their cases became public knowledge in their neighborhoods. The sense of loss and pride experienced by these men can be summed up in the words of a respondent who consented to the interview, but once the audio recorder was switched on, he took it and switched it off, saying,

*“Look, now I am a free bird. I am over those bad days. I don’t want to recall those humiliating moments I had faced. Still, I cannot accept defeat at her hands. I had to give Rs. 7 lakhs as 1 time alimony to get rid of this marriage with her. I am not at all concerned about those Rs 7 lakhs but the defeat at the hands of my wife is what bothers me still.”*

His masculinity had been challenged, which he could not accept. The role reversal in this case, where the man was “defeated” by his wife, confronted the hegemonic masculinity that has been conditioned to win since childhood.

Compounding the insult is the “*defeat at the hands of a woman*,” who in a patriarchal society is supposed to be the one who should have been under his control, which further compromises his manliness.

## DISCUSSION

Analyzing the lived experiences of men who suffered from IPV reveals that violent acts – physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual and threats are a regular part of their daily lives perpetrated by their wives and their natal relatives. Sexual victimization of a man by his female partner is a reality, as was reported in this study; however, due to its shameful nature, not many men reveal the details.<sup>10</sup> Psycho-emotional violence was reported as the most prevalent form of IPV.<sup>11</sup> These ranged from indirect modes such as physical violence against the parents of the husband, which ultimately affected the mental health of the men, to direct allegations of incestuous relations between the son and mother. False allegations by their wives lead to a precarious situation for the men as the legislative measures are supportive of women because the concept that men, too, can be IPV victims has not yet gained ground.<sup>12,13</sup> Threats of false allegations are usually employed by female partners to coerce their husbands to yield to their demands, leading to mental harassment. Furthermore, false contentions by the wives secure a strategic advantage for these women within the law enforcement system as well as the general society.<sup>13</sup>

Discontentment due to lack of financial resources was cited as the most frequent reason for the hostilities.<sup>11</sup> Abuse was also extended to the victim’s parents to increase the pressure on the victims and gain coercive control and power over the men.<sup>7</sup> In this study, the hostilities were committed to instigating the men to react physically so that it would be easier for the women to trap the men in domestic violence cases, which should also be counted as acts of violence because of their malevolent nature. IPV is a social problem that has been theorized in many ways, but it is not exhaustive, neither in its forms nor in its effects.<sup>10</sup>

Research shows that domestic violence against men is associated with various mental health problems such as stress, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, suicide ideation, and psychological stress.<sup>14,15</sup> The feeling of shame and worthlessness associated with being subject to abuse from their female partners is not only due to their dignity being impeded as a human but also the emasculation felt as a man being subjugated by a woman.<sup>16</sup>

IPV is overwhelmingly a gendered issue with male perpetrators and female victims in the majority of the cases, as reported within the medico-legal systems.<sup>10</sup> Traditional gender roles have depicted men as active and controllers of their fates, whereas women are considered to be passive. The

stigma attached to male victims of IPV prevents the men from disclosing their victim status, and they are not able to disclose their victimization even to their closest family members or friends. Thus, the men suffer for long periods in silence before they reach out for help. When they seek relief, their experiences are often subject to disbelief, ridicule, name-calling, and public shaming.<sup>17</sup> Due to these reasons, male IPV victims are often disinclined to expose their victim status and choose to suffer in private.

Surrounded by society's expectations of masculinity, the powerlessness experienced by these men is extreme and reflected in their reluctance to share their experiences with others for fear of being shamed and ridiculed.<sup>7</sup> In a patriarchal society, a man being abused by a woman is not only shamed by his family, community, and society at large but also by the protectors of law, such as police and lawyers. It is also a fact that the majority of the time, the law is more likely to rule in favor of a woman than a man.<sup>16,18</sup> This leads to the majority of the cases of IPV against men not being reported or delayed reporting and men remaining silent about their abuse. The paper highlights the men's disillusionment with society and the legal process when they try to communicate their victim status to society. All the men who participated in this study kept silent about their abusive treatment by their partners to uphold the conventional gender norms and not invite unsolicited questions about their masculinity from their families and communities.<sup>18</sup> Seeking help and treatment was not considered the first option but was resorted to only as a last resort. However, the acknowledgment of IPV against men by society will lead to the formulation of gender-neutral legislation for its effective redressal.

## CONCLUSION

The present study reveals that the participating Indian men are suffering from IPV – physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual which is detrimental to their physical and mental health. It also has an enormous economic impact, from increased healthcare costs to workplace issues such as absenteeism and productivity and legal costs. Socio-cultural norms that attribute men to a dominant position and legislative regulations that have been predominantly designed for women make it very challenging for men to disclose IPV and seek help. One of the limitations of the study is that we did not ask about reciprocal violence.

The traditional view of IPV with the man as the perpetrator and the woman as the victim has to be rejected in favor of the perspective that violence is a gender-neutral issue. Recognition of the fact that men can also be subjected to violence from their partners will open up avenues to discuss male experiences of IPV. Investigations into the experiences of men enduring IPV will help reduce the shame around it, which is wrongly conflated with patriarchal hegemonic male

identity. It will also help men break the silence surrounding IPV and campaign for gender-just laws for IPV. Accordingly, appropriate strategies and interventions have to be designed and implemented.

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