

## Research Article



## Violence against Women with Disabilities: A Qualitative Investigation

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**Abstract** | Many of the research studies have shown that usually people with disabilities and specifically women with disabilities are at increased risk of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well as to other practices of violence, such as institutional violence, drug use, undesirable sterilisation, medical abuse, mortification, and nuisance. This study is intended to explore the lived experiences of women with disabilities who have been subjected to any type of violence, generate a theoretical model for the ways in which women with disabilities survived and coped with their violence and finally to make suggestions and recommendations in order to reduce the elements causing violence against women with disabilities. In this study, a qualitative interpretive phenomenological research methodology has been used to explore, interpret, and evaluate the personal narratives of women with disabilities about their experiences with violence and abuse. The phenomenology approach was used to study the phenomena. A number of 05 women with disabilities who had physical disability or sensory impairment (visual and hearing) were purposively selected as the participants of the study. The age of participants was between 25 to 40 years and they had past experience of any type of abuse of violence, and were cognitively normal to respond interview. At first we identified the participants with the help of survey. A series of detailed and in- depth interview of 60 to 90 minutes were conducted from the participants. On the basis of collected data the researchers have given textural description and a structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide understanding of the common experience of the participants. Finally from the structural and textural description, the researchers wrote a composite description that to present the essence of the phenomena.

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### Introduction

Women with disabilities includes all types of women who meet the criteria of World Health Organization of Impairment, Handicapped and Disability.<sup>(1)</sup> Many of the feminist writers believe that women with disabilities are at increased risk of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well as to other practices of violence, such as institutional

violence, drug use, undesirable sterilisation, medical abuse, mortification, and nuisance<sup>(2), (3), (4), (5)</sup>.

Research regarding the occurrence of violence against disabled women is very limited and scrappy. Much of the literature on violence seems to focus predominantly on sexual abuse and mainly related to persons with intellectual disabilities<sup>(6), (7), (8)</sup>. It also suggests that most of the disabled women have same circum-

stances who experience violence: that is, mostly they are attacked by the person who is familiar to them, in isolation, or at their house, or at the house of their any friend, relative, neighbour or in their office<sup>(9)</sup>. It is also known as intimate partner violence IPV. IPV is more common than by any other perpetrator. Many of the international studies explore that women with disabilities are raped and abused at a rate at least twice that of the general population of women<sup>(10)</sup>. The rate of sexual attack of girls or women with developmental disabilities is at least four times higher than within the non-disabled population<sup>(11),(12)</sup>.

Pakistani society avoid discussing this problem by viewing this problem as random. Women of every class experienced broad categories of violence. Women belonging to educated class suffer with more emotional and psychological abuse while those belonging to feudal, tribal and lower classes experiences more physical abuse<sup>(12)</sup>. The forms of domestic violence in Pakistani society are different from other societies to some extent. For example in the case of domestic violence beating by husbands, stove burning, acid splashing, and honour killing are more common. Moreover, forced marriages including child marriages, exchange marriages, vani, trafficking, incest, rape, abduction and marriage with Quran are also common in Pakistani society. When the pattern of violence is analysed on the basis of provinces, in Punjab, VAW exceeds that of other provinces.

In seeking explanations of why women with disabilities are at increased of violence, much of the research focuses on the notion of vulnerability. Factors which account for the higher level of vulnerability related to disability includes emotional deprivation, social isolation, more open to incentives, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, repressed sexuality and susceptibility to coercion and the personality characteristics of women with disabilities like high levels of dependency on others, lack of assertiveness, over compliance and low self-esteem or poor self-concept.

Some other violence related factors specifically the environment of working places, where women are subjected to sexual harassment by the authority. The denial of reproductive rights of women with disabilities is also reported as causal factor of violence. Often women with disabilities do not receive general information on sexual and reproductive health. They are perceived as asexual and "being denied even as a

sexual identity, due to which they enter in to a state of extreme marginalization<sup>(13)</sup>. This marginalization exposes women to great risk of emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

In this study the researchers have tried to investigate the phenomena of violence against women with disabilities and their possible reasons in Pakistani society.

#### Objectives

This study is intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. Explore the lived experiences of women with disabilities who have been subjected to any type of violence.
2. High light the nature of violence experienced by the women with disabilities
3. Explore the strategies used by victimized women to survive and cope with the violence.
4. To make suggestions and recommendations in order to reduce the elements causing violence against women with disabilities.

#### Procedure of the study

In this study, we used qualitative phenomenological interpretive approach to explore, interpret, and evaluate the personal narratives of women with disabilities about their experiences with violence and abuse. Qualitative research is particularly suited to uncovering meanings people assign to their experiences. The phenomenology approach was used to study this phenomenon. There are seven unique perspectives of Phenomenology (Embree, 1997) however we have applied hermeneutic (Interpretive) phenomenology approach which is presented by the Heidegger (1889-1976).

#### Participants of the study

A total number of 05 women including two with physical disability, 2 participants with hearing impairment and 1 participant was with visual impairment. They were purposively selected as the participants of the study. The researcher selected only those women with disabilities as a participant of the study who had past experience of any type of abuse or violence. But who were cognitively normal to respond interview. For the selection of participants, at first we identified the participants with the help of survey. After getting their consent; we took appointments from them for the interview. A series of detailed and in- depth in-

terview of 50 to 60 minutes were conducted with the participants. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 25 years. Out of five participants two were 20 years old, two were 18 year old, and only one was 25 years old. All of them were unmarried. All of the respondents were formally educated; two of them were graduate (having physical impairment), two of them were F.A (HSCC) and only one had completed degree of Master of Arts in Special Education (having visual impairment). None of them was multiple disabled. All of them belonged to low (2) and upper middle class (3) socio-economic status.

In the beginning, we asked the participants two flexible questions: What have you experienced in terms of violence and abuse? We tried to provide an interactive and comfortable environment to the participants and probed them in a natural way to tell their story as naturally and complete as it was. Researcher in qualitative study plays a role of participant, moving from less active involvement in the beginning to a more fully participatory role towards the end. To ensure dependability, conformability and authenticity of the data and results all interviews were recoded and notes were taken on the spot by the researchers. The researchers shared their views with some colleagues on interview questions and interviews responded for the purpose of triangulation. Further all researchers were present during interviews so that there should not remain anything unexplored. The interviewers used probing technique where it was required but undue probing was avoided. Considering the ethical binding the information shared by the participants was intentionally secured and ensured its secrecy to all of the respondents. The participants cooperated and even enjoyed sharing their stories and experiences about violence and abuse.

#### Data analysis

In qualitative research data analysis is not a linear process rather it is dynamic and ongoing process which even begins at the very start of data collection. So we analysed data keeping standard qualitative data analysis approaches in mind. We used some standard coding procedures to guide our journey of exploring untold experiences. We one by one listened recorded interviews first combine as a team and later we individually listened the recorded interviews. We listened and re-listened the recorded interviews. All interviews were transcribed and we got their prints to read them again and reflect on them. For the identification and

differentiation of categories we used different colour markers. The interviews were transcribed very carefully and reflectively. For open coding we read each line of the transcripts of each interview. It was a rich data and it took a lot of time to listen recordings of interviews and transcribing recorded interviews. We read and reread the transcriptions for initial coding and categories. At this stage a very broader range of categories emerged. After reading and rereading initial codes we marked these transcriptions using different colour markers thus we reached major categories and themes. For the purpose of authenticity and dependability of categories and themes we shared these emerged themes and categories with all participants and researchers. At later stage after a deep reflections these major categories were refined and narrowed down to three major and final categories' cluster. At the final stage these four categories were interpreted (physical and sexual, emotional and verbal violence and abuse, and strategies to reduce their stress) and reinterpreted for the purpose of authenticity of the findings.

#### Findings and Discussion

We have discussed the findings according to the themes emerged and the participants' disability category.

##### Physical and sexual Abuse

The stories of the participants revealed that they were physically abused. According to the participants in physical violence they all were beaten by their brothers and sisters in one or the other form. One of the visual impaired student reported;

I am abused many times but I do not actually know the person who abused me. I am abused frequently but who was the person, how I could secure myself. .... I just prayed to God that God save and protect me from such violence, this pray to God gave me some rest and peace.

She further reported;

In future after such incidents I stopped intermingling with males anywhere but how I could stop it.

The other participant who was visually impaired told;

I physically touched many times I know but I

cannot see the person who actually touched....I have no idea about the person (Tears in Eyes).

These findings reveal that the participants had to find shelter in religious teachings. They found God the only shelter. They did not know how they could stop all this abuse and violence. This finding also shows the aspect of poor social ethical and moral values which exploit even the people with disability who even do not know who really abused them. This also shows that these persons can do nothing or they do not know strategies to solve such problems <sup>(13)</sup>.

One of the students with physical disability revealed that while lifting them from wheel chair people usually touch their upper and lower parts of her body and she feels such touches very stressful and harassing. She further told that on such occasions she was scared, frustrated and harassed but did not know to whom she could complain and how. This also reveals that there is still no proper system in our institutes to monitor and cater such complaints. The data revealed that all participants experienced, slapping, throwing, hitting, pushing, choking, kicking, beating and nudging at school and home both but the incidents of such violence are common at schools.

Participants with hearing impaired particularly expressed their stress about physical abuse such as; slapping, throwing, hitting, pushing, choking, kicking, beating and nudging etc. Female students with hearing impairment revealed that they are sexually harassed mostly by their class fellows during break time and off class tasks.

#### Verbal abuse

All participants reported about verbal abuse. They all told that they had to listen different sarcastic sentences and labels that are combined with their disabilities such as blinds, deaf, dumb and cripples etc. Whenever they come across even a mild mistake they are "abused" and given very bad names that are even not bearable for common normal people.

One of the participant with hearing impairment reported;  
Whenever I commit some mistake, I am abused.  
My parents and even teachers call me with very bad name.....

Participants also revealed their experiences of

being the victims of bullying by class fellows and other siblings.

One of the participant with physical disability said;  
I think people emotionally say such words as (deleted)....they call me with such names which are very heinous for me.

All these findings reveal that people with disabilities are verbally abused. They have to listen such names and labels which are not some time bearable for them. They are disgraced and disrespected.

One of the participants reported;  
Am I not human being... they consider me very lower level person when they talk with me...?

These stories explain how these people are verbally abused. They need respect, honour and the prestige they deserve whenever they are addressed and talked. They need attention and respect to a sustained self-respect level <sup>(14)</sup>.

#### Emotional abuse

Social isolation is a common phenomenon among the participants of this study. Participants reported about rejection, seclusion and social isolation. Students with visual impairment reported that they had to feel social isolation both at school and at home. While students with hearing impairment reported social seclusion at school.

Participants reported;  
They do not talk with me....  
One participant with visual impairment reported;  
At home it seems me as I am an alien and secluded..... I am always alone in society... nobody talks to me.

One participant with hearing impairment said;  
I feel as a rejected person... my friends ignore me and they do not involve me in when they are talking with one another.

All participants told about poor or lesser pocket money. They reported that parents did not give them sufficient money. Their other normal brothers and sisters were given sufficient pocket money according to their needs but they were not provided with sufficient

pocket money. They all named this withholding of pocket money as an abuse. This finding showed their emotional and social violence. They also reported that they were emotionally bullied by their class fellows and siblings.

One of the participants told;  
My parents do not give me pocket money equal to my brother and sister..

A student with physical disability reported;  
My mother says why you need money... she gives me very little money. They do not care for my needs.

Parents withhold the pocket money of children with disabilities because they think these persons do not need as much money as compare to their other normal siblings. This may be because parents underestimate but the persons with disabilities consider it a violence. These stories reveal that these people are moving towards awareness of violence.

All supporting staff at schools, colleges and universities should be trained and guided about the rights of persons with disabilities. They should be provided with preliminary orientations about different disabilities.

Persons with disabilities are not inferior to any normal person. The constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan stresses upon the equal fundamental rights of all citizens irrespective of any disability. Unfortunately in Pakistan awareness about persons with disabilities is nothing to none so we need a very comprehensive and applicable programme that can prevent, reduce and consequently help finish violence and abuse against persons with disabilities. Violence in any form can impede the academic, social, emotional and economic development of persons with disabilities who are very useful and productive members of our community<sup>(15)</sup>. We should discuss violence, abuse and their forms on all forums from school, class to public speeches. We should also work on awareness raising among the women with disabilities as during the data collection we have felt lack of awareness among women with disabilities regarding where they can go to complain against incident and about legal protection<sup>(16)</sup>. We should understand domestic violence especially with relation to persons with disabilities. Cases of low self-esteem are very common among persons with disabilities although they are denied not only by

schools, parents but also from society<sup>(17)</sup>.

## Conclusion

Persons with disabilities are not inferior to any normal person. The constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan stresses upon the equal fundamental rights of all citizens irrespective of any disability. Unfortunately in Pakistan awareness about persons with disabilities is nothing to none so we need a very comprehensive and applicable programme that can prevent, reduce and consequently help finish violence and abuse against persons with disabilities. Violence in any form can impede the academic, social, emotional and economic development of persons with disabilities who are very useful and productive members of our community. We should discuss violence, abuse and their forms on all forums from school, class to public speeches. We should also work on rising awareness among the women with disabilities as during the data collection we have felt lack of awareness among women with disabilities regarding where they can go to complain against incident and about legal protection. We should understand domestic violence especially with relation to persons with disabilities. Cases of low self-esteem are very common among persons with disabilities although they are denied not only by schools, parents but also from society.

## Recommendations

We propose the following recommendations to avoid the violence and abuse being practised on persons with disabilities. An appropriate and mandated monitoring programme must be launched in all institutions. This programme can help reduce the cases of violence and abuse among persons with disabilities. Families of persons with disabilities should be provided awareness of the violence and abuses faced by persons with disabilities. Especially mothers' need awareness of abuses and violence faced by the persons with disabilities. Heads of institutions and educational managers should be trained as most reported cases of violence and abuse occurred at school, college and university premises by class fellows and other peers. They should be given orientation about different forms of violence and abuse.

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