

## INVESTIGATING SELF-ESTEEM AMONG SEXUALLY ABUSED WOMEN

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### Abstract

This research study was conducted in *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* that focused on investigating the association between sexual abuse and self-esteem or self-esteem among sexually abused women. This was a qualitative research study with more focus on grounded theory. The data was collected from 30 respondents in six districts of *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with more open-ended questions. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face and the respondents were identified through social network. In this study, it was founded that majority of the respondents had very low self-esteem and social prestige. Majority of them preferred isolation because of low confidence in rebuilding their past relationship with their relatives, neighbors and other town fellows. Their social re-adjustment with past prestige was almost impossible for them because of lack of social support and low confidence in regaining their past status. Their belief in themselves was very negative; developed from the mistakes they committed previously. However, this negative belief was not only developed from their past mistakes rather more from lack of social support and discriminatory behavior at familial and societal levels.

**Key Words:** Sexual Abuse, Self-esteem, Low Confidence, Social Support

### Introduction

Self-esteem is the right of every individual spending life on the planet, irrespective of gender, creed, color or geography. However, some life incidents have very negative impact on self-esteem, such as physical and sexual abuse history. Low self-esteem is associated with physical abuse among men and with sexual abuse among women (Peter et al., 1988). Both negatively affect relational health of the victims which causes derogatory feelings. The risk factor of low self-esteem among men is associated with physical abuse because physical abuse affects masculine identity of men which results in low self-esteem. While among women, sexual abuse weighs more than physical abuse because sexual abuse affects their gender identity. A tarnished gender identity remains a main cause of sexual abuse history among women. Since, this research study focuses on sexual abuse of women, therefore, self-esteem in this context is more relational,

sexuality and gender centric. Because women's primary factor of confidence is their relationship which affects their gender and sexuality either positively or negatively. Self-esteem is very high among women when their relational health is good. Similarly, their gender and sexual self-esteem is high with high degree of relational health. Self-esteem increases and decreases among women with re-victimization or vulnerability to re-victimization. Re-victimization usually occurs among former victims of sexual abuse who are constantly under threat or observation of the victimizer. Quick sexual adjustment or re-adjustment of women also decreases the chances of re-victimization and helps in recovering self-esteem. Poor sexual adjustment or lack of sexual adjustment means vulnerability of the victim for re-victimization. This vulnerability of re-victimization can be removed or reduced with proper sexual adjustment of the victims. There are factors in abundance responsible for either preserving or decreasing self-esteem among sexually abused women which require proper investigation. Some of these factors and the relevant concepts are discussed in the following passage with more focus on women's social adjustment. Sexually abused women usually face a long-lasting phase of disorganization, particularly in sensitive cultural setups or societies plagued by male dominancy. This acute phase of disorganization covers a period from two weeks to one or more years (Patricia, 1981). However, this phase remains intact with revictimization episodes. This acute phase of disorganization negatively affects women's relational health and usually the victims keep themselves alienated. They do not intend to share the information of victimization with anybody due to low or no confidence in talking with other people. Though, the information is not known to others, but the victim assumes that her victimization is known to everyone, and she loses her confidence and fails to re-build her self-esteem in talking to others. Low confidence in sharing information with others and failure to regain her previous social prestige makes her vulnerable to revictimization. Because every offender constantly keeps on observing the victim and her behavior. Her isolation from the rest of the people and keeping her victimization information secret, attracts the offender for further episodes of revictimization.

Constant reverberation of traumatic information causes disruption in personality and relationship. This disruption negatively affects re-adjustment in work, leisure, family and society (Ibid). Familial and social relationship either devastates the relational health of the victim more or regenerates its strength. Regeneration of strength in victim's familial and social relationship is associated with quick re-adjustment with relatives including kids, partner, parents or siblings and friends including neighborhood, school mates, town fellows' etcetera. Quick readjustment means rebuilding of confidence by the victims and regaining of past strength in self-esteem and social prestige.

One main factor that increases vulnerability of the victim for re-victimization and slows down the process of re-adjustment, is lack of social support (Denielle et al., 2016). Every victim remains anxious for attachment, however, lack of social support results in victim's social isolation. Strong social support is positively associated with good relational health and the victims quickly regain their self-esteem by rebuilding their past social relationship. Every victim shows high level of contentment even with minute level of social engagement because it paves the way for quick re-adjustment and once the victim gains confidence in rebuilding social relationship, self-esteem and social prestige are automatically regenerated.

### **Research Methodology**

This research study was conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The key informers were sexually abused women living in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Sexual abuse was measured as nonconsensual sexual intercourse. Sexual victimization means any sexual encounter against a woman by any means in which the consent is absent. This victimization includes rape, forced sex or forced by acquaintance or relative, seduction by means of drugs, exhibition or any kind of trap. These

women were accessed through social network. Six districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were selected for this research study including district Swat, Upper and Lower Dir, Mardan, Nowshera, Peshawar and Swabi. The data was collected from 30 victims in these locations. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Of 30 victims none of them was educated or able to read or write properly. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face. In addition to 30 interviews, two focused group discussions were held with the respondents. All the questions were asked in local language and most of these questions were open ended. Open ended questions allowed more space to the respondents to explain every question the way they liked.

### **Low Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem, either low or high, is the belief an individual holds about himself (Murphy, 2011). Self-esteem is the corresponding belief which every individual holds about himself and this belief varies with the variation in experiences and circumstances. A belief in oneself can be either negative; developed from the mistakes an individual committed previously or positive; developed from the confidence built up in an individual from achievements. Recognition of high or low self-esteem is actuated from the variation in these beliefs, associated with past experiences and circumstances. Psychological or emotional health is associated with low or high self-esteem and it is due to the nature of belief an individual holds about himself. Holding a negative or positive belief about oneself determines the internal capacity or power of an individual to cope with incidences of stress. Incidences of stress particularly domestic violence or sexual violence are negatively correlated with satisfaction or positive orientation towards life (Hassan and Malik, 2012). Usually, low self-esteem is found in an individual when exposed to overwhelming stress and even gets worst when coupled with mental health problems such as schizophrenia (Kane and Correll, 2010). Schizophrenia is a state of mental illness, involving brain chemistry where an individual fails to manage his emotions, decision making, thinking processes and relationship (Duckworth, 2013). Schizophrenia is one of the possible symptoms among people exposed to overwhelming stress. Patients of schizophrenia have quite low social engagements because they are unable to catch up with other people in society. According to Kane and Correll (2010), split personality disorder is usually confused with schizophrenia, however, both the terms are different but the impact is same. The impact of overwhelming stress or sexual abuse may be either schizophrenia or split personality disorder. Split or multiple personality disorder is caused when an individual is exposed to overwhelming stress. Similarly, split personality disorder is caused to an individual affected of schizophrenia. In both the cases the victim is unable to cope with society or social standard. Sexual abuse is one of the significant incidences that makes the belief in oneself change very rapidly (Murphy, 2011). Sexually abused women usually hold negative belief about themselves that develops low self-esteem and affects their resilience. The opinions they form about themselves and others in society have a deep negative impact on their adjustment. These distressing negative beliefs and opinions drive them into an inferiority complex where they are unable to cope with personal and social standards and values. Pakhtun society is unique on the basis of prevailing norms. Some of these norms are quite inhuman but still they are valued and practiced by the local people. Certain norms, as mentioned in the previous chapters, are discriminatory against women, such as avoiding victims of sexual abuse in relationship, murdering them for honour, rejecting and handing them over in enmity (Amin, 2010; Huda, 2006). All these practices affect their adjustment in society. They usually adapt themselves to standard and behavior which men expect from them. When they are rejected by their families and society, they adjust themselves to a standard where they are further humiliated. It is due to the belief which they hold about themselves in relationship to the social world. This belief which every woman holds about herself, is called self-esteem (Murphy, 2011). This belief is determined by interpersonal experiences and the social environment. Experiences,

through which a woman passes, account for a high degree of variation in the belief one holds about herself. This belief is interpersonal but depends on the circumstances and events in the social world. Since, every individual is a unique organization who interacts with other organizations in society, therefore, every individual tries to adapt to standard which people value. This adaptability is basically an interaction that is developed by interpersonal and social relationship. This development of interpersonal and social relationship is called social adjustment. Social adjustment is totally a psychological process. In other words, it is called a coping process with the demands and pressures of the social world. In social adjustment, there are some necessary social characteristics which exert a high degree of influence on interpersonal and social relationship, such as social norms, social facilitation, obedience, compliance and conformity, social influences and interventions etc. It means that the whole of the adjustment process is vested in individual's behavior thereby forming collective behavior. It was found in this study that every victim of sexual abuse is arrested in her own belief which she holds about herself. However, this belief is made up of the perception, she makes of the social world where mutual-cooperation, facilitation and respect lacks for her. This lack of respect in the social world, compels them to believe in their low self-esteem. Illegal sex for women in the target area is an offence, the punishment for which is either death or ex-communication. No woman intends to have indiscriminate sex with men for money but since this is the only opportunity created for her in the social world, therefore, she surrenders to this odd standard. This practice is the ultimate asylum for her to sustain her life and the life of her husband or children. Some of the victims were involved in commercial sex but their aim was not to satisfy their lust but to sustain themselves and their children. They were victimized and re-victimized by the perpetrators to enslave them in an unending bondage of prostitution and addiction. They held quite negative belief about themselves. To a question, one of the respondents replied:

“We are most oppressed and weak. Nobody gives us respect because everyone knows of our character but we are not that bad the way we are treated by men. We have our husbands and children while living in the ferocious world, full of oppression and tyranny. Society even does not forgive our children who are innocent and do not know anything. This society is very violent in behavior because it first compels us and then avenges us”.

This behavior is not specific to a woman, rather every victim in the target area is treated in the same way. These victims are given no respect and even people associated with them, particularly their children are also avenged for the scourge, they never inflicted. Their adjustment in this harsh social world is impossible because they are the offenders of a norm in which there are no precedents of acquittal or redemption. These victims and their families are arrested into a lifelong contempt. They have no self-esteem, because they are treated less than human in society. Their low self-esteem is totally associated with their sexual abuse. The degree of contempt and hate is associated with specific labels assigned to them. In the local language, different vulgar slangs are used for such women. In this discussion, none of these slangs is mentioned because they are vulgar in use and meaning. These slangs are sometimes used when people despise each other.

## **Conclusion**

Among the major consequences of sexual abuse, low self-esteem was comparatively common among the respondents. Low self-esteem was strongly associated with bad relational health lack of social adjustment. Lack of social adjustment included adjustment at work, family and the society. Impact of sexual abuse on their physical and relational health was very negative. They were unable to face their relatives and carry out relationship with other people in the society with confidence the way they previously faced them. Majority of the women had ended their

relationship with family members and they revealed that they were not given any respect by the relatives. Social isolation was a common factor among all the respondents and it was because of low confidence in rebuilding their past relationship and social prestige. Majority of the women in this study had left their hometowns/villages and they had settled in urban areas or away from their hometowns because they wanted readjustment in new locations, however, lack of social support negatively affected their re-adjustment in the society. Secondly, they were always vulnerable to perpetrators and majority of them were re-victimized and still vulnerable to re-victimization. It means that low self-esteem and lack of social support restrained them from getting re-adjusted in the society with previous prestige and honor.

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