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PROFILES OF MALE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS IN MALAYSIA: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Domestic violence is a global issue. Much literature focuses on women as a victim of domestic violence. Unfortunately, male victims in Malaysian society are still an overlooked issue. The national statistics on domestic violence against men have shown that violence still happens in our society. In this article, the demographics of the male survivors and the partners or ex-partners were described. All the data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews which were interviewed by the researchers. Profiles of the men samples were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings derived from this study are discussed in relation to the demographical characteristics of the men survivors and their partners. Instead of attempting to be representative of the population, these fundamental characteristics of the sample serve to provide a glimpse into instances of domestic abuse among male survivors. The purpose of this study intends to advance understanding of the actual conditions surrounding the issue and qualitatively contribute to the expanding body of knowledge on domestic abuse against males.

Keywords:

Profile, Domestic Violence, Male, Survivors

Introduction

In Malaysia, domestic violence involving either the husband as victim, or the wife as a victim, is a serious social problem (Rahman, 2013). Public awareness regarding domestic violence involving female victims is high; unfortunately, male survivors of domestic violence have not been researched as comprehensively as have sheltered populations of battered women (Hines,

Brown, & Dunning, 2007). Men's experiences of domestic violence, however, remain an important issue in need of further study (World Health Organization, 2005). Domestic violence is rarely discussed in society from a male victim's perspective because the information available on such abuse is minimal, and incidents often go unreported (Ramon Bernard Younger, 2011).

The number of male domestic violence survivors reported by the Royal Malaysia Police in 2018 numbered 1474 (Royal Malaysia Police). In 2015, the number of reported male victims was 1270 (Royal Malaysia Police), whereas three years later, the number increased by another 204. However, the statistics only show an increase in the number of victims every year, and do not describe the recovery experience of victims; very few studies have been carried out on the topic in the Malaysian context. Although the number of cases may seem small, there are undoubtedly cases that go unreported due to the stigma of being a male abuse victim in Malaysia. Abused men are less likely to lodge a police report against their female partners or consult anyone for help, for a number of reasons—among them, a sense of shame and a discouraging social support service (Drijber et al., 2013; Gadd et al., 2003; Muller, Desmarais, & Hamel, 2009).

Laroche (2005) stated that 83 percent of the men from 25,876 samples "feared for their life" because their female partner directly terrorized them compared to the 77 percent of women who felt unilaterally threatened. Hines and Douglas (2010) stated that 20 percent of the male victims had experienced physical violence (use of a knife, choking, scalding, burning, targeting of the genitals) during attacks, with 95 percent of the female perpetrators performing the violence. According to Brown (2004), men are however more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for domestic violence than women, even when other factors were controlled (Henning and Renauer, 2005). Russell (2012) reported that men are less likely to receive a protection order against their partners. Muelleman and Burgess (1998) stated that the low rate of male injuries reported might be due to men's reluctance to admit being hurt by a woman.

Even though there is an awareness among male victims of the importance of reporting domestic violence to the proper authorities, men are less likely to seek help for medical and psychological needs (Commonwealth Fund 1998; Tudiver and Talbot 1999). Domestic violence toward men is underestimated because men are less likely to view this as a crime, or report it to the police (Dutton, 2013). Men do not want to say anything because they are socialized to bury their problems under private shades (Goldberg, 1979). Many men feel that they cannot address the matter, or that no one will listen to them or help them solve the problem (Younger, 2011). Due to the significant amount of resources required to address this issue, domestic violence concerns need to be viewed as an urgent and significant issue.

Literature Review

According to the Domestic Violence Act 1994 in Malaysia, domestic violence is defined by the following acts: "(a) willfully or knowingly placing, or attempting to place, the victim in fear of physical injury; (b) causing physical injury to the victim by such act which is known or ought to have been known, would result in physical injury; (c) compelling the victim by force or threat to engage in any conduct or act, sexual or otherwise, from which the victim has a right to abstain; (d) confining or detaining the victim against the victim's will; or (e) causing mischief or destruction or damage to property with intent to cause, or knowing that it is likely to cause, distress or annoyance to the victim, by a person against (i) his or her spouse; (ii) his or her former spouse; (iii) a child; (iv) an incapacitated adult; or (v) any other member of the

family". Similarly, the American Psychiatric Association (2005) defines domestic violence as control by one partner over another in a dating, marital or live-in relationship. The means of control include physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, threats, and isolation. Looking back at these definitions, the acts of domestic violence engaged by abusers match the signs and manifestations described by the above organizations and by the Malaysian domestic violence act. Apart from that, World Health Organization (WHO) provided a definition for domestic violence as "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or 23 sexual harm to those in the relationship" (Krug, 2002). Along with that standpoint, Conroy et al (2019) define intimate partner violence as any kind of action that happens "between current and former legally married spouses, common-law partners, girlfriends and boyfriends and any other relationship of intimate partners"

According to Namadi (2017), men can also be victims of domestic violence. A male is abused by his female partner every 14.6 seconds (Barber, 2008). Namadi was interested in studying the prevalence and nature of male victims in domestic violence situations. Male victims normally feel shy about the assault from their female partners and they are clueless as to what to do next (Namadi, 2017). The researcher conducted a cross-sectional study of domestic violence in Kenya with 120 male participants. The findings show that male victims do experience various forms of abuse at home. This indicates that male victims of domestic violence are a reality that is revealed in many forms, either naturally or unnaturally. Due to the traditional perception that men are physically stronger than women and therefore more able to defend themselves in situations of abuse, men are less likely to talk about this matter to others or report it to the authorities. Men are silently suffering from intimate partner abuse out of fear of embarrassment (George & Yarwood 2004; Watson & Parsons, 2005).

In Malaysia, studies on domestic violence are relatively limited. Gianesan and Chethiyar (2021) explore the cause of domestic violence from the viewpoint of counsellors who handled domestic violence cases during the Covid-19 pandemic. There was a rise in cases from March 2020 to April 2020 of a total of 409 cases recorded (Berita Harian Online, 2020). This led the researcher to explore the reason behind the rise of the cases. Researchers have interviewed four registered counsellors and found that financial factors are the main reasons for domestic violence happening in Malaysia. Along with that, responsibility burden factors, factors of failing to manage time properly, family factors, environmental factors and lastly drug and alcohol intake factors are the factors causing domestic violence. This finding has been supported by Renzetti (2009) where financial problems caused family men or women to be entrapped in the situation and led to an abusive relationship. Many sources claim that, there are many reasons behind the reasons of occurrence of domestic violence, there is always a story from each of the participants who are involved in domestic violence.

Generally, one of the main reasons for domestic violence against males, based on the various studies discussed above, seems to be that male victims tend to keep the abuse to themselves and not share it with anyone, which allows the perpetrator to continue performing the abusive acts. Other causes are a need to control and anger expression. Overall, it can be concluded that both perpetrator and the victim bear shared responsibility for domestic violence.

Methodology

The data collection for this study required the participants to complete a paper-based structured inquiry form with their biographical information. Basic demographic information was asked to

fill in the form. Besides that, semi-structured questions were prepared, and a one-to-one interview session with all the participants was conducted. The interview was focused on personal details, family details as well as in-depth details on the contributing factors to domestic violence. The function of the interview in this study is to gather the demographical characteristics of the men and their wives or ex-wives. A total number of 6 Malaysian men aged between 25 and 40 years were recruited. Some readers may wonder whether it is appropriate to quantify the findings given that this was a small-scale qualitative study. Therefore, the authors decided to present their findings even if the sample size did not accurately reflect the population. The low number of respondents is due to the nature of this research and the cultural perspective that discussing marital issues with others was still viewed as taboo in Malaysian society.

These fundamental features of the sample were only intended to provide a general indication of the prevalence of domestic violence, as was stated earlier in the abstract section. Patton (2015) has stated that there are no limits and requirements for sample size in qualitative studies and it solely depends on the researcher who wants to know “what is the aim of the study, what is useful information, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the time and resources availability” (p.311). The discussions derived from the study mostly served to describe the specifics of this particular research sample within the framework of the study. Thus, the outcomes of this study were not used in making generalizations about domestic violence among men survivors as a whole.

Results

Demographical Characteristics of the Male Survivor

The participants in this study were 6 men who volunteered to share their experiences of surviving in domestic violence relationships. The sample age was between 25 and 40 years, most were in their late 20s and late 30s. On the whole, the men in this study had been married for between one to three years. The majority of the men had met their wives in the higher education institution. Only one man disclosed that they met in the same workplace. Among them, none were no longer involved in a relationship with the abusive wife. Three of them were divorced and the remaining three are still waiting for a divorce to be granted by the court (with the abusive partner). Out of this, none of the men had been remarried. Generally, the men who reported leaving their wives stated the reason was due to violence and abuse.

In terms of the length of abusive relationships, the findings showed a majority of men reported that the relationships had lasted between one to three years period. Most men reported that they had experienced abuse within their initial years of marriage. Some men indicated that the violence had started after three to five years of happy marriage only. The length of time men had suffered domestic violence ranged from one to three years, with an average of 1.83 years.

The three men that make up the narrative of this research were Indians, in addition to two Malay Muslims and one Chinese. The majority of the men had one to two children. Two of them had no children at all because the violence started after the marriage and they had no happy marriage at all. Most of the men completed their bachelor's degree and one man completed his Master's studies and one man did his Ph.D. in Social Sciences. There is one man who just completed his high school. Most men shared that this domestic violence experience has been a trigger point in their life to pursue their studies after being abused by their partners.

During the occurrence of violent relationships, more than half of the men identified their occupation as Executive in offices, then followed by one Government teacher. In relevance to the occupation reported by the men, all the men reported that they had their source of income and taking care of the family well. After they left their abusive relationship, they upgraded themselves and one man completed his PhD and became a lecturer at a public university. Two of them started a new business after they left the abusive relationship. All of the men were actively working at the moment the interview took place.

The findings show that five men had lived in a nuclear family. It shows that the victim and perpetrators stay in a close environment. One man stated that he stayed with in-laws and they acted as a "bystander" and at times vocally encouraged it without showing any inclination to intervene. Nonetheless, all of the violent behaviors were reported to be perpetrated by the wives only. Overall, only one man reported being involved in an arranged marriage, however, the majority of them stated they knew their wives well before they decided to enter the marriage life.

Demographical Characteristics of the Female Perpetrators

The mean age of the abusers was 28.17 years (range from 25 to 35 years). The majority of wives or ex-wives completed their Bachelor's degree followed by upper secondary school. One of them was a Master's holder who worked in the government sector. Besides that, two of them had stopped at secondary school because of the family's financial status and holding the responsibility to take care of their siblings. Thus, they started to work at a young age. Three of the wives were Indian with Tamil ethnicity, two of them are Chinese and one is Muslim with Malay ethnicity.

Three of the wives were working in the private sector and one in the government sector. There was also one of them who is unemployed. In terms of income, two received RM 1800 per month, two received more than RM 2001, and another one received between RM 2001 and RM 3500 per month. One of the women has no regular income due to unemployment. One husband reported that he did not know at all about his wife's pay.

Discussion

Overall, the study's findings indicate that the men's female spouses were the culprits in the abusive relationship. In detail, all the men in this study reported that they have left the abusive relationship and four of them got divorced and two of them were waiting for the judgment from the court. It can be said that the perpetrator was either a current or previous relationship. According to Walby and Allen (2004), domestic violence's worst occurrences that occurred in the previous year were caused by current and former partners/spouses. In addition, it is interesting to note that the men in this study reported that none of the family members, siblings, or relatives have engaged in any violent behaviors towards them. The Royal Malaysia Police (2020) has shown the data that there are cases that involved in-laws, family members, and relatives. It is a common cause of domestic violence in Malaysia. Unfortunately, this study was unable to demonstrate the scenario of a family member's involvement in a violent relationship.

Despite the fact that there is not much involvement of others than spouses in domestic violence in this study, there are other published studies showing the involvement of family members and in-laws in domestic violence (Hines, Bates & Wallace (2022). A study has exposed that

70% of the nonreciprocal violent behavior was from women perpetrators (Whitaker et al, 2007) which supported the current findings. Similarly, Sarkar et al (2007) interviewed 1650 husbands and found out that 32.8% experience economic violence, followed by 22.2% physical violence and 17.7% sexual violence from their spouses. The difference between the current study and studies by Hines, Bates, and Wallace (2022) may be related to some cultural variations in some Asian countries. In Asian countries, family-in-laws and relatives will be viewed as immediate family members and will expect to stay together even after marriage which can lead to violent behaviors in the family.

The current study found that the perpetrators' age category is in between 28 and 35 years and the victims are between 25 to 40 years old. The age of the perpetrator is not significantly related to domestic violence due to the purposive sampling method in this study. Similarly, previous research has found no discernible pattern in the ages of domestic violence victims or offenders (Catalano, 2007; Kernic & Bonomi, 2007; Chen & White, 2004). Furthermore, the results are consistent with other research that indicated that younger people typically experience more domestic violence than older persons. Kernic and Bonomi (2007) stated that victims under the age of 33 made up the majority of those who reported being victimized to the police, followed by victims between the ages of 34 and 44 (25%) and victims over 44 (10%). Additionally, Chen and White (2004) asserted that there was no correlation between the prevalence of committing domestic violence and the age of intimate partner violence. Anyone, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, employment, background in education, or religion, has the potential to commit domestic violence.

There is one more important finding in this study the majority of abused men are educated, employed, and partially depend on their wives' income to run the family. They stated that the expenses of the family were shared by both of them. These findings have supported Kumar (2012) that the majority of husbands who experience domestic violence were well-educated and had stable financial status. He added that most men bear the situation and stay in the relationship for the sake of children and family, fear losing their status in society, and also believe that things will get better. However, other authors demonstrate contrasting findings on female survivors. In Sarkar's (2010) study, the female participants who were exposed to domestic violence economically depended on their husbands. A possible justification for all men in this current study who left the abusive relationship is due to stable jobs and income to run themselves with more confidence.

Conclusion

Overall, it is concluded that the characteristics of abused men and their wives/ex-wives varied. The majority of the men and their wives were in their 20s and 30s. They believed that they had to leave the abusive relationship after being abused by their partners. They started a happy married life, and leaving the relationship is the best decision ever for them. The majority of the abused men in this study were Malaysian Indians and had completed their degree studies and the wives were completed their higher secondary school. All of the men in the study were employed and financially independent in their life.

Domestic violence is a global issue that contributed to numerous mental health and social problems. According to the literature, domestic violence happens to men due to a lack of understanding, stereotypes, and also traditional perceptions that males are stronger than women. Most studies has been done in Western countries with very few focusing on men as

victims. This current study aims to reveal the characteristics of men victims together with women as perpetrators in the Malaysian context. Even though, this study focuses on six participants, it will offer valuable input to the body of knowledge in terms of demographical information. Even so, these findings may find useful to other readers, researchers, counselors, helping professionals, and policy-making organizations, for application to their own environment as well as increasing public awareness in Malaysia.

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