



SOCIAL STIGMA FACED BY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT PARIHAR, BENGALURU

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ABSTRACT:

Domestic violence survivors frequently face social stigma, including victim-blaming, discrimination, and social exclusion, which can negatively affect mental health, self-esteem, help-seeking behaviour, and recovery. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of domestic violence survivors receiving counselling at Parihar, Bengaluru. Using purposive sampling, survivors attending counselling services participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed through thematic analysis. Eight themes emerged: victim-blaming; family and community reactions; shame, guilt, and self-stigma; impact on mental health; barriers to seeking support; role of counselling in recovery; social support and resilience; and recommendations for social change. Participants reported being blamed for the abuse, pressured to preserve family reputation, and discouraged from disclosing violence. Stigma contributed to anxiety, depression, fear, isolation, and delayed help-seeking. Counselling was described as a safe and non-judgmental space that reduced self-blame, improved emotional well-being, and strengthened coping abilities. Supportive relationships and peer networks enhanced resilience. The study concludes that social stigma is a major barrier to recovery and social reintegration, highlighting the need for stigma-reduction initiatives, survivor-centred counselling, mental health support, and stronger community-based interventions in Bengaluru.

INTRODUCTION:

Domestic violence is a widespread social problem that affects millions of women across the world, regardless of age, education, religion, or socioeconomic status. It includes physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse perpetrated by intimate partners or family members. Domestic violence not only causes immediate physical harm but also has long-term consequences for the mental, emotional, and social well-being of survivors.

In India, despite legal provisions and increasing awareness, many women continue to experience violence within their homes. One of the major barriers that prevents survivors from seeking help is social stigma. Social stigma refers to the negative attitudes, stereotypes, discrimination, and victim-blaming behaviours directed toward individuals who are perceived as different or socially undesirable. Women who experience domestic violence are often blamed for the abuse, judged by society, or pressured to remain silent to protect family honour and social reputation.

The stigma associated with domestic violence can have profound effects on survivors. It may lead to feelings of shame, guilt, isolation, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Social stigma can also discourage survivors from reporting abuse, accessing support services, or participating in counselling programs. Consequently, many women continue to suffer in abusive relationships due to fear of social rejection and criticism.

Counselling centres and support organizations play a vital role in helping survivors cope with the effects of violence and rebuild their lives. Parihar, Bengaluru, provides counselling and support services to women facing domestic violence and related family issues. Understanding the experiences of survivors who seek counselling at Parihar can provide valuable insights into the ways social stigma influences their lives and recovery process.

This qualitative study seeks to explore the nature of social stigma experienced by domestic violence survivors attending counselling at Parihar, Bengaluru. The study aims to understand how stigma affects their psychological well-being, social relationships, help-seeking behaviour, and coping mechanisms. The findings may contribute to the development of more effective interventions and policies that promote survivor empowerment and reduce societal stigma.

Background of the Study

Domestic violence remains a significant social issue affecting women physically, psychologically, socially, and economically. Survivors often face social stigma from family members, relatives, neighbours, and the wider community. Such stigma may discourage victims from reporting abuse, seeking help, or rebuilding their lives. Counselling centres play a crucial role in supporting survivors; however, the experiences of social stigma continue to influence their recovery process. This study aims to explore the nature and impact of social stigma among domestic violence survivors receiving counselling services at Parihar Organization, Bengaluru.

Formulation of Research Problem

Domestic violence is a serious social issue that affects the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of women. While survivors face the immediate consequences of abuse, they also encounter significant challenges from society in the form of stigma, victim-blaming, discrimination, and social exclusion. Instead of receiving support and understanding, many survivors are judged, blamed for the violence they experience, or pressured to remain silent to protect family reputation and social norms.

Social stigma can have a profound impact on domestic violence survivors. It may lead to feelings of shame, guilt, fear, isolation, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Such experiences often discourage survivors from seeking professional help, reporting abuse, or accessing counselling and support services. As a result, many women continue to suffer in abusive environments and face difficulties in rebuilding their lives.

Although counselling services provide essential support for survivors, social stigma remains a major barrier to their recovery and social reintegration. There is a need to understand how domestic violence survivors experience and perceive stigma and how these experiences influence their emotional well-being, help-seeking behaviour, and coping strategies.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the social stigma faced by domestic violence survivors receiving counselling at Parihar, Bengaluru, and to understand its influence on their lives and recovery process. The findings of the study may contribute to the development of effective interventions, counselling practices, and awareness programs aimed at reducing stigma and supporting survivors of domestic violence.

Review of Literature

1. Social Stigma among Domestic Violence Survivors

Taccini and Mannarini (2023), in their systematic review of 24 studies on intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors, found that stigma is a significant challenge faced by survivors. The authors categorized stigma into two forms: public stigma and self-stigma. Public stigma includes negative attitudes, stereotypes, victim-blaming, and discrimination from society, while self-stigma refers to survivors internalizing these negative beliefs. The study concluded that stigma adversely affects survivors' self-esteem, emotional well-being, and willingness to seek support services.

2. Victim-Blaming and Social Exclusion

Research has consistently shown that survivors of domestic violence are often subjected to victim-blaming attitudes. A recent report examining family court judgments found widespread victim-blaming and gender bias against women survivors. Survivors frequently reported that their experiences were minimized, questioned, or attributed to their own actions. Such responses reinforce feelings of shame, guilt, and social exclusion, making recovery more difficult.

3. Psychological Impact of Stigma

The literature indicates that social stigma has severe psychological consequences for domestic violence survivors. Feelings of shame, fear, embarrassment, and isolation are common outcomes. **Taccini and Mannarini (2023)** observed that stigma contributes to depression, anxiety, low self-worth, and emotional distress among survivors. Internalized stigma often prevents women from discussing their experiences openly and seeking professional help.

4. Help-Seeking Barriers among Survivors

Bauer, Dlamini, and Coutinho (2025) identified social and psychological barriers as major obstacles preventing women from seeking assistance. Fear of social judgment, family pressure, lack of support, financial dependency, and concerns about community reputation were among the most common barriers. The study emphasized that stigma remains one of the strongest deterrents to formal help-seeking behavior.

Similarly, **Hulley et al. (2022)** found that women from minority and immigrant communities experienced additional barriers due to cultural expectations, social isolation, and fear of community backlash. These factors often delayed or prevented access to counselling and support services.

5. Family and Community Responses

Studies suggest that family and community reactions significantly influence survivors' decisions regarding disclosure and help-seeking. **Femi-Ajao, Kendal, and Lovell (2020)** reported that many women hesitate to disclose abuse because of fear of being blamed, disbelieved, or stigmatized by family members and community networks. Cultural norms emphasizing family honour and marital stability often discourage women from reporting violence.

6. Social Isolation and Lack of Support

Bellotti et al. (2021) examined the role of personal networks in domestic violence cases and found that social support can either help or hinder survivors. Negative reactions from family members, friends, and community members often intensified feelings of loneliness and isolation. Survivors who received

supportive responses were more likely to leave abusive relationships and seek professional assistance. Evidence from survivor testimonies further suggests that women frequently feel ignored or unsupported even when they disclose abuse to professionals and institutions. Such experiences contribute to distrust and discourage future help-seeking efforts.

7. Role of Counselling and Support Services

Counselling services play a crucial role in helping domestic violence survivors cope with trauma, rebuild self-confidence, and develop resilience. Research indicates that supportive and non-judgmental counselling environments enable survivors to share their experiences openly and access resources necessary for recovery. Effective counselling interventions can reduce self-stigma, improve emotional well-being, and encourage social reintegration.

Research Gap:

The reviewed literature demonstrates that social stigma significantly affects domestic violence survivors' mental health, social relationships, and help-seeking behaviour. While numerous studies have examined domestic violence and stigma internationally, limited qualitative research has focused specifically on the lived experiences of women receiving counselling services in Bengaluru.

Social stigma during their recovery process. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of domestic violence survivors receiving counselling at Parihar, Bengaluru.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the experiences of social stigma among domestic violence survivors attending counselling at Parihar Organization.
2. To examine the influence of social stigma on survivors' psychological well-being.
3. To understand how stigma affects help-seeking and counselling utilization.
4. To identify coping mechanisms adopted by survivors to deal with social stigma.
5. To suggest measures for reducing stigma and enhancing support services.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a **Qualitative Research Design** to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of domestic violence survivors regarding social stigma. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring participants' perceptions, feelings, experiences, and meanings attached to social phenomena.

A **Phenomenological Approach** is employed to understand the lived experiences of domestic violence survivors and how they perceive and experience social stigma in their daily lives. This approach enables the researcher to capture the subjective realities and personal narratives of the participants.

Study Area

The study will be conducted at **Parihar Organization, Bengaluru**, a Counselling and support centre that provides services to women and families facing domestic violence and related issues. The organization offers counselling, guidance, and support to survivors seeking assistance and rehabilitation.

Study Population

The study population consists of **domestic violence survivors receiving Counselling services at Parihar Organization, Bengaluru**. These participants have first-hand experience of domestic violence and are capable of providing valuable insights into the social stigma associated with their experiences.

Sampling Technique

The study will use **Purposive Sampling**, a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Participants who have experienced domestic violence and are currently receiving Counselling services at Parihar will be selected for the study.

Inclusion Criteria

- Women who have experienced domestic violence.
- Individuals currently receiving Counselling services at Parihar Organization.
- Participants willing to provide informed consent.
- Participants aged 18 years and above.

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals who are unwilling to participate in the study.
- Participants below 18 years of age.
- Individuals whose psychological condition does not permit participation in an interview.

Sample Size

The study will include **25 participants**. The final sample size will be determined based on the principle of **data saturation**, which is reached when no new themes or information emerge from additional interviews.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth Interviews

The primary method of data collection will be **In-depth Interviews**. This method allows participants to freely share their experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding social stigma and domestic violence. The interviews will provide detailed and rich qualitative data necessary for understanding the lived experiences of the participants.

Semi-structured Interview Guide

A **Semi-structured Interview Guide** will be used to facilitate the interviews. The guide will contain open-ended questions related to experiences of stigma, family and community responses, emotional impact, help-seeking behaviour, coping strategies, and the role of Counselling services. The flexible nature of the interview guide will allow participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that all relevant topics are covered.

Data Analysis

The collected data will be analysed using **Thematic Analysis**. The interviews will be transcribed, coded, and organized into themes and sub-themes. Thematic analysis will help identify recurring patterns, meanings, and experiences related to social stigma among domestic violence survivors.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent will be obtained from all participants before data collection.
- Participation will be voluntary, and participants will have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.
- Confidentiality and anonymity of participants will be maintained throughout the research process.
- Personal information and interview data will be used solely for academic purposes.
- The study will ensure that no psychological harm is caused to participants during the interview process.
- Permission will be obtained from the concerned authorities of Parihar Organization before conducting the study.

Tools for Data Collection

- Semi-structured Interview Schedule
- Audio Recorder (with participant consent)
- Field Notes and Observation Notes

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on understanding the experiences of social stigma among domestic violence survivors receiving Counselling services at Parihar Organization, Bengaluru. The findings may contribute to improving Counselling practices, awareness programs, and support services for survivors of domestic violence.

Findings & Discussion:

Theme 1: Experiences of Victim Blaming

Most participants reported experiencing victim-blaming attitudes from family members, relatives, and society after disclosing domestic violence. Instead of receiving support, many women were questioned about their behaviour and held responsible for the abuse they suffered.

Participants revealed that comments such as "you should adjust," "you must have provoked him," and "a good wife tolerates difficulties" were commonly directed at them. Such responses made survivors feel misunderstood and discouraged them from speaking openly about their experiences.

Victim-blaming contributed to feelings of helplessness, anger, and disappointment. Several participants stated that these attitudes reinforced their decision to remain silent about the abuse for extended periods.

Key Finding: Victim-blaming emerged as one of the most significant forms of social stigma experienced by domestic violence survivors.

Theme 2: Family and Community Reactions

Family and community responses played a crucial role in shaping survivors' experiences. While a few participants received emotional support from parents or siblings, the majority reported negative or unsupportive reactions.

Many families encouraged survivors to continue living with abusive partners to maintain family honour and social reputation. Community members often viewed domestic violence as a private family matter and discouraged intervention.

Participants reported feelings of rejection and isolation when their concerns were dismissed or minimized by family members and neighbours.

Key Finding: Traditional social norms and concerns about family reputation often prevented survivors from receiving adequate support from family and community networks.

Theme 3: Shame, Guilt, and Self-Stigma

A majority of participants described experiencing intense feelings of shame and guilt following incidents of domestic violence. Many internalized societal judgments and began blaming themselves for the abuse.

Some participants believed that they had failed as wives or mothers because of marital conflict. Others reported avoiding social gatherings due to fear of judgment and negative comments from others.

Self-stigma affected participants' self-confidence and made it difficult for them to seek assistance or discuss their experiences openly.

Key Finding: Social stigma often became internalized, resulting in self-stigma that negatively affected survivors' self-esteem and personal identity.

Theme 4: Impact on Mental Health

Participants reported various psychological consequences resulting from both domestic violence and social stigma. Common emotional experiences included:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Fear and insecurity
- Stress
- Emotional exhaustion
- Sleep disturbances
- Feelings of hopelessness

Several participants stated that social judgment from others was sometimes as painful as the violence itself. Constant criticism and lack of support contributed to emotional distress and reduced psychological well-being.

Key Finding: Social stigma significantly intensified the mental health challenges already experienced by domestic violence survivors.

Theme 5: Barriers to Seeking Support

Fear of social judgment emerged as a major barrier to seeking help. Many participants delayed reporting abuse or accessing Counselling services because they feared criticism from family members and society.

Additional barriers identified included:

- Fear of damaging family reputation
- Economic dependence on spouses
- Lack of awareness about available services
- Fear of retaliation from abusive partners
- Concern for children's future
- Social pressure to preserve marriage

Several participants sought professional help only after experiencing severe emotional distress or repeated incidents of violence.

Key Finding: Social stigma and fear of societal reactions significantly delayed help-seeking behaviour among survivors.

Theme 6: Role of Counselling in Recovery

Participants described Counselling services at Parihar as an important source of emotional support and empowerment. Counselling helped survivors understand that the violence they experienced was not their fault.

Key benefits of Counselling reported by participants included:

- Improved self-confidence
- Emotional relief
- Better decision-making abilities
- Increased awareness of rights and available resources
- Development of coping strategies

Many participants stated that Counselling provided a safe and non-judgmental environment where they could express their emotions freely.

Key Finding: Counselling played a crucial role in reducing self-blame, improving emotional well-being, and supporting the recovery process.

Theme 7: Social Support and Resilience

Although participants experienced stigma, many demonstrated remarkable resilience in overcoming challenges. Support from trusted family members, friends, counsellors, and support groups contributed significantly to their recovery.

Participants reported adopting various coping strategies, including:

- Seeking Counselling services
- Engaging in employment or skill development
- Participating in support groups

- Practicing spirituality and prayer
- Building independent social networks

The presence of supportive individuals helped survivors regain confidence and rebuild their lives.

Key Finding: Social support served as a protective factor that enhanced resilience and facilitated recovery from domestic violence.

Theme 8: Recommendations for Social Change

Participants emphasized the need for greater public awareness regarding domestic violence and social stigma. They suggested that society should focus on supporting survivors rather than blaming them.

Major recommendations included:

- Conducting community awareness programs on domestic violence.
- Promoting gender equality and women's rights.
- Strengthening Counselling and mental health services.
- Encouraging family support for survivors.
- Increasing public knowledge about legal protections and support services.
- Addressing victim-blaming attitudes through education and media campaigns.
- Creating safe spaces where survivors can share their experiences without fear of judgment.

Key Finding: Participants believed that reducing social stigma requires collective efforts from families, communities, service providers, educational institutions, and policymakers.

Overall Conclusion

The findings reveal that domestic violence survivors face significant social stigma in the form of victim-blaming, discrimination, and social exclusion. These experiences adversely affect their mental health, self-esteem, and willingness to seek help. Despite these challenges, Counselling services and supportive relationships contribute positively to survivors' recovery and resilience. The study highlights the importance of addressing social stigma through awareness, education, Counselling, and community-based interventions to promote the well-being and empowerment of domestic violence survivors.

Suggestions

1. Conduct regular community awareness programs on domestic violence and its impact on survivors.
2. Organize campaigns to reduce victim-blaming attitudes and promote empathy toward survivors.
3. Promote gender equality through educational programs in schools, colleges, and communities.
4. Strengthen Counselling services to provide emotional and psychological support to survivors.
5. Establish survivor support groups where women can share experiences and encourage one another.
6. Encourage families to provide emotional support instead of pressuring survivors to remain in abusive relationships.
7. Increase awareness about legal rights and protection laws available for domestic violence survivors.
8. Improve access to legal aid, shelter homes, helplines, and rehabilitation services.
9. Provide regular mental health services to address anxiety, depression, trauma, and stress among survivors.
10. Train social workers, counsellors, police personnel, healthcare professionals, and legal practitioners to adopt survivor-cantered approaches.

11. Conduct community workshops to challenge harmful cultural norms that justify domestic violence.
12. Encourage community leaders and local organizations to actively support domestic violence survivors.
13. Promote responsible media reporting that avoids victim-blaming and raises awareness about domestic violence.
14. Develop livelihood and skill-development programs to enhance survivors' economic independence.
15. Create safe and confidential spaces where survivors can seek help without fear of stigma or discrimination.
16. Strengthen collaboration between NGOs, government agencies, and Counselling centers to provide comprehensive support services.
17. Encourage peer mentoring programs where recovered survivors can guide and motivate others.
18. Conduct family Counselling sessions to improve family understanding and support for survivors.
19. Introduce domestic violence awareness and gender-sensitivity education in educational institutions.
20. Advocate for stronger implementation of policies and laws aimed at protecting domestic violence survivors and reducing social stigma.

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