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The Silenced Voices: A Qualitative Insight into Causes and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence in Lahore, Pakistan

Dr. Sonia Omer
&
Saad Siddique Khan
Department of Social Work
University of the Punjab, Lahore

Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is globally recognized as one of the pivotal public health issue that affects millions of women around the world. The present qualitative study has aimed to highlight the causes, effects, and prevalence of IPV in Pakistan. The study has detailed narratives regarding the nature of violence, coping strategies, barriers to seeking help, and experiences with legal and social institutions. The affected women who had knocked on the doors of courts with the help of non-governmental organizations (NGO) were listed and contacted with the help of a purposive sampling method in the present study to obtain data. The study used the Amedo Giorgi framework of phenomenology for the analysis. The findings of the study cited numerous forms of IPV revealed by respondents, including physical, mental, emotional, and economic abuse. Certain social and cultural factors, including male dominance and the subordinating status of women in society, exist and strengthen phenomena like IPV. The findings reported the presence of anxiety and depression among the majority of respondents, which is a result of the most persistent form of violence: mental and psychological. The factors related to husbands, like unemployment, drug addiction, and extramarital affairs, further aggravated the prevalence of IPV. The women's own independence, educational status, economic stability, and help-seeking behavior were found to be key factors contributing to reducing incidents of IPV. The study concludes that IPV is a multidimensional problem in Pakistan that requires a holistic approach where strong societal institutions and a focus on gender based inequalities can play an essential role in preventing IPV in Pakistan.

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, Coping Strategies, Social and Cultural Factors, Unemployment and Drug Addiction, Gender Based Inequalities.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been an issue of discussion since the end of the 90s and remains a serious social problem. IPV is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as *"any behavior in a close relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to the people in the relationship"*. There are important statistics revealed

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by WHO that says an approximately one in three women in world have been subjected to one or other kind of violence like physical a mental, sexual and emotional (WHO, 2024). The husband typically commits violence, but sometimes violence is perpetrated by in-laws or close relatives too. As a matter of fact, IPV is a global phenomenon, with its prevalence cited in all parts of the world. The majority of women are reported to be affected by different kinds of IPV, but they do not complain of it since they have been indoctrinated that men are superior and it is normal to be tortured by the hands of husbands (Ali et al., 2021). Domestic violence is the most prevalent type of violence that women suffer in developed and developing countries of the world, and most of all is considered a serious health problem because of the scale and extent of such violence (Iqbal & Fatmi, 2021). This violence inflicts a great deal of suffering on those women and their children (Izaguirre & Calvete, 2015). WHO's multi-country study on violence against women found incidence of physical and SV in the lifetime ranged from 15% to 71% and the past-year prevalence varied widely, the lowest was in Japan (4%) and highest in Ethiopia, Peru, and Bangladesh with 54% (García-Moreno et al., 2005).

On the other hand, Pakistan is a developing country with 244 million people (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). It is a male-dominated country where partner violence against women is a common practice and a cultural norm in marriage. This kind of violence towards women is based on the notion that partner violence is an internal affair and is often a legitimate reaction to the wrongdoing of the spouse, which is a non-Islamic attitude (Uthman et al., 2009). Most of the Pakistani women are unaware that violence is a criminal act, and even if they do, they are afraid of taking any action as they will all have to suffer harsh consequences from their in-laws, or they will lose the custody of children. Similarly, social values thoroughly restrict women to living alone in Pakistani society. (Ali et al., 2011). There are other factors that are majorly responsible for the prevalence of IPV in a country like Pakistan. Any individual who has been abused in the past has most likely experienced a negative home environment in their childhood (Korbin, 2003). Violence, in most cases, occurs as a result of the scenario experienced in the past. In maintaining the equilibrium of dependency and independence in relationships, women work hard and sacrifice while bearing violence (Flinck et al., 2005). Besides, Poverty is considered another significant factor behind the prevalence of IPV. Low-income women are much more vulnerable to domestic violence and poverty, and it restricts their choices and assets (Slabbert, 2017). The cultural norms and practices in a country like Pakistan where men are dominant and women are kept inferiors, violence is taken as a normal practice (Sikweyiya et al., 2020).

Perhaps, IPV in Pakistan can be seen under several factors that are integrated. For instance, the substance abuse among men is not the only reason but is further linked with men's own vulnerabilities in society, which include their socio-economic conditions. The poverty, unemployment and men's being seen as a sole and only bread winner in society

are additional, yet important factors that contribute to the prevalence of IPV (Gillum, 2019), Such pressures produce tensions among men and cause violence. The use of alcohol and any form of drugs is also held responsible for impaired judgment among men, ultimately increasing the chances of IPV (Arteaga et al., 2015). Additionally, marrying off girls at a young age is a common practice, in particular in rural Pakistan. Not only does this hurt the health of young girls and children, but it also leads to higher rates of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) due to girls being minors, unaware, uneducated, and dependent. Furthermore, the practice of dowry and expectations from women to get more wealth from their parents throughout her life is another factor reported in researches that cause violence (Gulzar et al., 2012; Bhamani et al., 2023). Furthermore, the common side effects of IPV are as serious for the mind as for the body. Physical violence is visible, which also remains a normal practice in many households; however, mental and psychological violence can lead to depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, anxiety, and depression, etc. Victims of IPV are often burdened with more than one issue at a time, causing their situation to be much more complicated (Wessells & Kostelny, 2022). A significant study conducted in Lahore revealed that two-thirds (64.3%) of the female population of Lahore had psychological problems and one-third (30.4%) suffered from severe mental disorders in a survey of married females. Being constantly exposed to stress and toxic relationships, like verbal abuse and beatings, leads to serious mental health issues in common in Pakistani society (Ayub et al., 2009).

The support of the family as an institution in Pakistan towards women who experience IPV is yet another challenge in this entire phenomenon. Being a traditional country, the major chunk of society in Pakistan believes in certain social and cultural factors. These factors predominately favors men's and gives power and autonomy to men in most of the circumstances. The divorce and separation is considered a stigma and women are threatened to be abandoned by society if they do not keep their marriage sustained (Waseem et al., 2020). Men are seen as the head of the family, a decision-maker, and a breadwinner. Women, being submissive and subordinate to men, lose their self-independence and self-esteem even in urban areas (Zakar et al., 2013). The family members of men who are involved in most of the violent incidents seem to behave as a quiet audience; perhaps in many cases they join the criminal activity of men when he is abusing women. On the other hand, the women's own families believe in the old custom that brides, once married, never return to their families, no matter what circumstances they go through. Such existing social norms and cultural beliefs are deep-rooted in the case of IPV in Pakistan (Richardson, 2022). In most cases of IPV, women keep a deep silence. Studies have also observed that they strive to come out of the abusive environment when they see that children are suffering. The most of the legal battles in courts reveal children well-being as a prime reason when women decide to step out of the marriage (Nasrullah et al., 2015).

Objectives of the Study

IPV is a widespread and multifaceted problem in Pakistan, impacting women's lives deeply. This research has investigated this phenomenon in detail and suggested evidence-based strategies to eliminate this social problem.

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate the prevalence of IPV and its types among the female population.
2. To know the social, economic, demographic and cultural factors contribute to IPV.
3. To look at the consequences of IPV on women.
4. To recommend policy implications to prevent a high rate of incidents of IPV.

Review of the Literature

As mentioned above, IPV is defined as physical, sexual, or psychological abuse from an intimate partner, spouse, or family member (current or former). Violence can happen between a man and a woman, or between two men or two women. Dating relationships are also sometimes defined as IPV by some authorities, in particular in the developed world (Acosta et al., 2015). This includes physical violence (PV) as well as psychological abuse. Abusers might intimidate or constantly humiliate their partners. Threats and forced sexual acts are common too. Other controlling behaviors, such as stopping someone from seeing friends or tracking their movements, fit the definition as well (Lövestad & Krantz, 2012). According to research, IPV is when people in close or intimate relationships physically, psychologically, or sexually harm each other, including dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships. These encompass, for example, physical aggression, slapping, hitting, and kicking (Mennicke, 2019) and mental torture like constant intimidation and putting someone down (Krantz & Vung, 2009), isolating a person from loved ones, tracking their movements, and limiting access to money, information, or vital services. (Wilson & Fritz, 2023). IPV is about controlling and overpowering a partner (Hamberger et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2013). It is not simply a spontaneous or natural phenomenon; this is reinforced by beliefs about how women should be treated. Men's attitudes toward IPV are influenced by their upbringing, the socialization process they experience in the family, and the various socialization mechanisms at different layers of the social structure (Taherkhani et al., 2014). On the personal level, boys end up taking on a masculine and violent attitude, and in communities, hurting women can become accepted as regular stuff, and those who commit the crime are allowed to get away with it (Zakar et al., 2013).

Conceptualizing and Explaining IPV Types

The World Health Organization's (WHO) explanations of IPV refer to "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the

relationship" (WHO, 2012). Furthermore, IPV consists of many forms of abusive acts, which include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, economic abuse, as well as sexual coercion and domination of one partner over the other (Nadeem & Malik, 2021). Among the several other forms, some of the significant forms of IPV are given below.

Physical Violence (PV)

This includes physical damage and harm by using force. This can cause injury, pain, or any disability in the victim. A few examples that can be quoted for this form are beating, slapping, kicking, hitting, burning, or threatening a partner while using any object (Steen & Hunskaar, 2004).

Psychological Violence (PsyV)

This includes harming a partner by damaging his/her emotional well-being. This includes insults, verbal threats, intimidation, insulting before others, or coercion. The consequences of such types of violence include low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, or mental ailments among the victim **(**World Health Organization, 2013). Sexual violence (SV), this act involves sexual activity with a partner without consent. This type of violence adds to severe physical complications, including injury to the body, reproductive health problems, and abortions among women by force, etc. Sexual violence, as a matter of fact, turns into rape, which eventually leaves extremely devastating impacts on the victims (Zakar et al., 2012).

Spiritual Violence (SPV)

Another lesser-known type of violence is spiritual violence, which is an attack on the belief system of any individual. A victim's belief system and religious practices are suppressed. Most of the time, the victim is humiliated before others for believing in a certain religion. Besides, restricting the victim to his/her belief system and religious practice can become violent, which turns into physical and mental abuse, and a victim loses his/her sense of identity (Dehan & Levi, 2009).

Research Methodology

The current study employed a qualitative research design to gain a deeper understanding of the respondents' lived experiences and views on the phenomenon of IPV. The local non-government organization working on women's rights was approached to reach the women who had experienced IPV and had sought legal help to address the issue. With the help of the purposive sampling method, a total of eighteen respondents were interviewed until the researcher reached a saturation point. With the help of an extensive literature

review and the broader objectives of the study, the interview guide was developed, which included questions related to reasons, consequences, and effects of IPV, as well as different forms of IPV, coping mechanisms, and women's help-seeking attitudes towards this. The office of the non-government organization in Lahore was selected to conduct interviews. The consent of all the respondents was obtained, and each interview continued for more than an hour. The flexibility in the questions in the interview guide allowed participants to freely share their life experiences related to IPV. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The analytical work used the Amedo Giorgi framework and consisted of several rounds of reading transcripts, coding salient statements, identifying patterns, and creating themes and subthemes that reflected the experiences the participants lived (Giorgi, 2012). The results were analyzed and discussed in terms of the theoretical framework and research goal. Systematic data analysis, reflexivity, and adherence to qualitative research standards were employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Ethical considerations remained an important aspect of the study, where respondents were given the freedom to withdraw from the interview at any point in time. Besides, participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The study had its own limitations, where the lives of women experiencing IPV have been investigated, and the researcher did not broaden the scope of the study by investigating the deep impact of IPV on children.

Findings

The current study has investigated IPV and has found significant factors responsible for the prevalence of IPV in a country like Pakistan. The women's own status in this country, including their education, social and economic background, the male dominance in society, patriarchal traits, and weak legislative processes, combine to create an atmosphere in Pakistan where issues like IPV are strengthened. The key themes that the study has obtained are as follows:

Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The eighteen respondents of this study presented a weak social and economic background. The average age of the respondents fell between 28 and 35 years. A greater majority (15) in terms of education had a middle school education. The (12) participants reported living with parents amid legal battles, whereas (14) reported working in the informal sector but with a poor monthly income ranging between 25 and 30 thousand Pakistani rupees. The (13) respondents had average three children whereas rest informed being issueless. The greater majority (10) were sending their children to government schools. The (17) Respondents, a very large majority, informed of taking loans, despite NGO support to fight legal battles against husbands. The (16) participants informed of

currently living in Lahore but originally they belonged to different cities of Punjab. A greater majority (13) reported having a typical rural background. The (14) respondents had an average of 15 years of married life.

The Social and Cultural Traits

Certain social and cultural practices in Pakistan strengthen the gender inequalities and give rise to the notion of males as a superior creature. The current study strongly found that the issue of intimate partner violence is deep-rooted in harmful social and cultural practices. Women are gladly accepted as obedient homemakers rather than educated professional workers. The responsibility of bread and butter lies on the shoulders of men, where a patriarchal system, purdah (veil), and misinterpretation of religious preaching's play an important role in keeping women inside their houses. The study found the dowry related expectation, early marriages and women own ignorance add to women vulnerability towards act of violence. The societal pressures on women at one hand snatch women freedom and on other hand limit their access to justice system. Besides, not following family planning and having a large family size adds a burden on both men and women. One respondent shared:-

> *"I was married off at the age of 17 when I had one year left to complete my matriculation degree. The four children in less than five years added responsibilities, and the heated arguments with my husband turned into violent incidents on a daily basis".*

Marriage Preservation amid Violence Incidents

The study has pointed out that institution of marriage in Pakistan in most of the cases becomes a liability. The rural family setup believes in marrying off girls at a young age. The same trait, with little variation, is also found in urban areas where marriage for girls is mandatory. The culture of keeping marriage alive and pressure on women to preserve it under any circumstances is a brutal reality that exists in this society. The study found that despite reporting incidents of abuse, the family's role remains one-sided, where husbands are supported even if the case of abuse is reported. The matter becomes a harsh reality when the woman's family accepts violence and advises their daughters to stay in marriage. Divorce and separation are considered a stigma, and women are told that a life full of difficulties will wait for them if they leave a husband. This helps in continuing the violence cycle. A respondent in her mid-thirties said

> *"Once I knocked at my parents' doors with bruises on my face in the middle of the night. My parents had no courage to face my husband, who physically abused me. They just allowed me to stay for a few days with*

them and made efforts for reconciliation with my husband. I was the one who apologized to my husband later and went to his home again."

Factors Related to Husband

The current study found male dominance highly instrumental in sustaining IPV in Pakistan. The role of the husband is crucial in maintaining a strong marriage in Pakistan. However, the study highlighted that men in this society deal with multiple responsibilities, where taking care of old parents, siblings, and family becomes their priority. The extra interference of mothers in sons' lives and decisions related to their marital life leads to a strained relationship between husbands and wives. In addition to that, the use of alcohol or substance abuse and extramarital affairs are also common factors responsible for IPV prevalence. The silence of women in such scenarios is what society appreciates. In most of the cases, its practice is also justified. The unemployment and low income of men in this country, and pressures on men, give justification of abuse and any kind of violence on women is considered normal. The study also indicated that men replicate the same violent behavior which they have seen in their childhood. A respondent shared.

"My mother-in-law would proudly share whenever my husband would scream and raise a hand on me that he is just like his father in temperament".

Barriers to Social and Economic Empowerment

The current study highlighted that in a patriarchal system, marriage is considered the only safe haven for Pakistani women. In such a scenario, the lack of focus on women's education leads to ignorance of women towards their rights and duties, thus causing intimate partner violence. The stereotypical gender roles where men are bread earners and women are seen as caregivers shut the door on independence for women (Soomar, 2015). Furthermore, women's mobility outside the home in many households is discouraged. Even where women end up working somewhere due to poverty, their less education status makes them stick to laborious work where they are underpaid in most of the cases. As a matter of fact, women's character is also seen with suspicious eye once they step outside their homes. The increased economic dependence on men is a pivotal reason behind violence against women. One of the respondents stated:-

"*I used to run a small catering business. Whenever I had an interaction due to business matters with any man, my husband would torture my body with lit cigarettes."*

Consequences of IPV beyond Physical Violence

The current study also found multiple factors that deeply affect women's entire lives, which extend beyond the physical violence. There have been significant findings in the current study that revealed women, when they go through physical violence, persistently develop severe psychological challenges. The respondents have reported being in a state of constant fear and anxiety in their lives. A greater majority in the current study shared having sleepless nights and panic attacks. One of the respondents shared:-

> *"I would get panic attacks and would start shivering when it was time for my husband to return from work. He would beat me without a reason. I would constantly look at the watch when his arrival time was near and would get frightened."*

Respondents of the study shared that while living in constant uncertainty, they started losing self-esteem and self-respect. The environment of constant control and dependence on men ended up in social isolation for many. A greater majority continued to live with this for years unless they saw irreversible impact on their children. One of the respondents stated:-

> *"I could see my son's speech was not clear. I once took her to a children's hospital where they referred him to a psychiatrist. There, the specialist doctor told me how observing continuous incidents of violence at home is impacting my son's physical and mental growth."*

Victim Blaming and Legal Barriers

The participants of the study shared that women were the ones held responsible for a failed marriage or unrest at home. A greater majority were of the view that there has always been a blame game by close family members that women fail to provide a peaceful environment at home. A constant blame game towards women helped husbands to keep abusing wives without much thought about the repercussions. That culture is deep-rooted in a Pakistani society which believes that foundation of strong household is attributed towards women role and responsibilities. Furthermore, many respondents shared that even thinking of consulting any legal firm for their rights is considered a stigma in society. In general, women's access and approach to police and courts are attributed to women being over smart, bold, or characterless. In such a scenario, a greater majority of women are discouraged from approaching the justice system when needed. A participant in the study shared:-

"When I first contacted a non-government organization working for married women's rights, I kept it a secret. My own family threatened me that they would leave me for good if I ever contacted any lawyer. However, I had to enter a legal battle. When my husband came to know of this, not only he, but my own father abandoned me.

Discussion

The present study provides qualitative depth to the understanding of the interaction between individual, family, and social factors responsible for the prevalence of IPV in Pakistani society and broader factors. The findings reflect key themes that have been recently explored in global and regional studies such as patriarchy, economic dependence, limited agency, stressors connected to husbands, and stigma at the social level. These connected factors illustrate the complexity of IPV and the importance of complex interventions. The study showed that patriarchal norms help abusive men by making their behavior seems normal and limiting the autonomy of women. This corresponds with recent findings of how norms that support male authority and women's subordination in decision-making are associated with tolerance of IPV and women survivors' capacity to seek assistance (Bari et al., 2025). Pakistan has a strong culture of gender stereotyping that not only affects intimate relationships, but also the community's reaction to violence, which often prevents women from addressing abusive relationships for fear of social condemnation.

Another important factor of IPV was economic dependence. Limited education and job opportunities of women made them more vulnerable to abuse as they were economically dependent on their husbands and they did not have the means to leave violent relationships. This study, however, is in line with the existing evidence of the protective and empowering role of women's education and economic participation in combating IPV, as observed in recent times. Educated women who are working have more awareness of their rights, more self-confidence, and better access to resources to recognize the abusive patterns and seek assistance and/or exit from abusive relationships (Shaikh, 2024). This is supported by international studies that consistently find socioeconomic disadvantage and financial dependence to be associated with increased IPV risk and decreased help-seeking (Ghoshal et al., 2023). Sustaining marriage at any cost is also a significant theme in the narratives of the participants. Women were advised to accept violence in order to prevent family shame or dishonor for separating, reflecting the high level of social reinforcement for marital relationships, even if they were violent. This reflects results from wider studies identifying social norms that discourage help-seeking among survivors and promote IPV systemically. Evidence indicates that the pressure on women to maintain their family names and to avoid divorce or separation is very strong and hinders their autonomy and perpetuates the status quo of abuse (Shaikh, 2024).

Other factors that emerged as important predictors of IPV in this study were the effect of husband-related stressors, including substance abuse, unemployment, and infidelity. These are similar to those identified in recent situational risk studies, which found that alcohol and substance use heighten the risk of IPV through an increase in aggression and/or conflict within relationships (Krahé, 2025). Economic pressures such as unemployment can intensify household stress and lead to increased conflict, triggering more and more serious violence. The study also documented the impact of stigma and victim blaming on discouraging people from seeking help or reporting IPV. Similar to findings from recent research on IPV stigma, many participants reported shame, fear of judgment, or fears of not being believed. Studies indicate that these perceived and internalized stigma influences survivors' help-seeking actions and promotes continued victimization and poorer health (Willan et al., 2025).

Beyond help-seeking barriers, evidence from broader research also identifies mental health effects of IPV that can persist long after abuse or neglect has ceased (Fedina, 2024). Interventions should address gender inequalities and harmful social norms as root causes, and support women dependent on the economy who are affected by violence. Economic empowerment programmes, community education, and a robust legislation and policy response are all components of an effective public health response to IPV (Güler et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2025). In conclusion, this study has established that the factors which contribute to the existence of IPV in Pakistan are structural inequality, economic dependency, harmful gender norms, and weak institutional response. These patterns are similar to the international evidence and highlight the importance of context-specific policies and interventions that address root causes and existing barriers to women's lives in abusive relationships (Jewkes, (2002).

Policy Implications

The following policy implications are proposed to provide a comprehensive approach and strategy to address IPV effectively through cultural transformation, community support systems, economic empowerment, legal changes, and health sector responses.

Reform Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

One of the major factors in Pakistan's high IPV rate is the strong patriarchal system, which has established gender stereotypes and male dominance. Traditional gender stereotypes may be challenged, and gender equality needs to be encouraged in public education campaigns, particularly concerning intimate relationships. The campaigns need to focus on the need for mutual respect, non-violence, and gender equality among young people and adults, particularly in urban and rural regions. Moreover, the involvement of men and boys

in these campaigns will assist in breaking negative gender norms, and religious and community leaders can play a role in changing negative gender norms by providing alternative interpretations of cultural and religious norms (Oyekcin et al., 2012).

Empowering Women Socially and Economically

Since women with low education and less working capacity are more vulnerable to IPV because of their economic dependency on their partners, it is critical to provide mandatory education, vocational training, skill development, and a financial literacy program to give women the tools to achieve financial independence. Microfinance schemes can also offer small loans to women and make them financially independent so that they can leave unsafe environments. Financial independence allows women to have the freedom to escape the cycle of abuse.

Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Survivor Support Systems

The legal framework in Pakistan needs to be changed in order for IPV survivors to be able to seek timely and efficient justice. Particular focus may be placed on educating the police and the judicial system on IPV cases, and ensuring that restraining orders are enforced and victims are protected in a timely manner. There needs to be greater access to legal aid for survivors, enabling them to access the legal system. There may be additional domestic violence shelters and crisis centers. Strengthening non-government organizations working in this domain will offer victims of IPV urgent, safe accommodation, legal and psychological assistance. The strict laws and punishment to the perpetrators of IPV may set examples for other which can be helpful in reducing IPV incidents.

Enhance Health Sector Responses to IPV

Healthcare providers may be educated about the symptoms of IPV and how to approach and respond to it in a compassionate and non-judgmental way. The standard screening of IPV should be included as part of regular check-ups, so women can get help at their routine check-ups. Train health professionals and professional social workers may provide assistance in trauma-informed care, psychological support and to refer survivors to legal and social services. There is a need to increase mental health support for IPV survivors in health services to reduce the long-term psychological impacts (Rivara et al., 2007)

Build Stronger Support Networks and Community Services

Having a strong support network is a key for assisting survivors of IPV to rebuild their lives. Social services may offer housing, child care, and employment support, which are

significant factors that prevent women from leaving an abusive relationship. Emotional support and a sense of solidarity can be provided by community-based support groups, which can help reduce feelings of isolation. Public health education messages may provide information about services available and ensure survivors know where to get help and resources for survivors.

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Dr. Sonia Omer is an Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Director Sughra Begum Center for Education Policy and Development.

Saad Siddique Khan is a Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Social Work, University of the Punjab, Lahore