

**'HOPE AND FAITH SEE US THROUGH A LONG NIGHT TO A BRIGHTER DAY' –  
MOVING OUT OF VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS AND RESILIENCE AMONG  
FEMALE SURVIVORS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Studies on the subjective experiences of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) among Indian women are far and few and there are hardly any studies focussing on the resilience of these women.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this investigation was to understand the experiences of violence among female survivors of Intimate Partner Violence who had moved out of an abusive intimate relationship with a specific focus on the resilience factors in these women. The resilience factors that enabled women to leave the abusive intimate relationship were explored.

**Materials and Methods:** This study defines resilience as the ability to endure and recover from crises and traumatic life experience. Purposive sampling technique was employed for this qualitative study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 survivors of IPV who were housed at the Government Reception Centre for Women, Bangalore Urban. Interviews were audio-taped wherever consent for the same was given by the participants. The transcribed data was coded and the main themes were summarized.

**Findings:** Four major themes emerged from a qualitative content analysis of the data - A need to assert their self-worth, having a hopeful outlook, capacity for independence and being able to take initiative and action were the resilience factors that facilitated the process of leaving the abusive relationship for these women.

**Conclusion:** Survivors of violence in general are a group that need to be approached with great sensitivity. But in addition to it one another major attitudinal necessity is that of positivism of strength. Practitioners need to be recognized and affirm women's strengths and sense of agency in surviving abusive relationship.

**Key Words:** Coping, Partner Violence, Resilience factors

**INTRODUCTION**

Violence against Women is a phenomenon that is prevalent globally and since time immemorial, it has been an intrinsic part of the society that we live in. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines IPV as 'any behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviour' (WHO, 2012).<sup>[1]</sup> According to the WHO factsheet on intimate partner violence (2003),<sup>[2]</sup> Violence against women particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women - are major public health problems and violations of women's human rights.

Recent global prevalence figures indicate that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. On an average, 30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partner and globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner (Berg et al., 2010).<sup>[3]</sup>

Resilience has been defined as - the ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges;<sup>[4]</sup> - strengths forged through adversity<sup>[4]</sup> and - as an inner resource, which is the ability to succeed in the face of adversity.<sup>[5]</sup>

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Research focussing on the strengths of the survivors has shown that although the pain that an individual subjected to intimate partner violence experiences should not be minimized in any way, it does not have to be considered as the focus of their identity as well; that the stunning capacity for survival and the perseverance that these survivors display tends to be present in parallel. Regardless of the pervasive negative effects of intimate partner violence, many women have prevailed over their circumstances effectively due to resiliency.<sup>[6]</sup>

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However, studies on resilience have largely focussed on the capacity of managing to survive in the problem situation as encompassing resilience; the other aspect of resilience – rebounding from disruptive situations have not been given much focus through research in the past.

This qualitative research study focussed on exploring and understanding the resilience factors among women who had walked out of an abusive marital relationship.

## **METHODS**

Participants were female survivors of intimate partner violence who had moved out of the marital relationship and sought shelter at the Government Reception Centre for Women, Bangalore Urban, India. The participants for the study were referred to the researcher by the Superintendent of the Centre based on their records. The women were then screened for the presence of any mental health complications and those women who were identified to have mental health problems were referred to NIMHANS for treatment and assisted through the treatment process. Women who screened negative were interviewed for the study.

The participants were briefed about the study and informed consent was sought. Written consent for was obtained from all participants confirming their willingness to participate in the study. In all, 12 women were approached for the study, however since two of them refused consent for the interviews, a total of 10 women were interviewed as part of the study. Out of this 8 women had consented to the interviews being audio-taped. Field notes were taken for all the interviews. All women were assured confidentiality and were interviewed in complete privacy in the interview/counselling rooms at the State Home's premises.

The ages of the participants ranged between 18 to 43 years. Six of them had completed 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade of schooling, while three of them had completed graduation and one participant was a post-graduate. Two of the women had been in an employment prior to leaving their homes and six of the women had at least one child. A semi-structured interview guide was used for the in-depth interviews.

The interviews were conducted with the purpose of gaining an understanding of the ways in which these women responded in the face of challenges and exploring the personal characteristics and environmental factors that supplied their capacity for resilience.

The interviews were conducted in Tamil (a south-Indian language) and eight out of the ten interviews

were audio recorded. Field notes were made immediately after each interview. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and both the transcriptions and field notes were translated to English by the researcher. The researcher's personal observations about the interview – the entire experience, impressions and challenges as well as observations about the data were recorded as memos in a diary.

## **DATA ANALYSIS:**

Data analysis was done using both deductive and inductive coding methods. The researchers used manual inductive qualitative content analysis method during the coding process. The transcribed interviews were initially inductively coded and later the codes across interviews were compared and organized (Rubin and Babbie, 2010).<sup>[7]</sup> Interviews were transcribed and each verbatim transcript was initially analysed separately. Following this, reading and listening to accounts of the participants several times brought an understanding of the major issues that were expressed. The researcher summarized the content, simultaneously drawing parallels, distinctions and associations among them. Repeated reading of the transcripts gradually led to the emergence of various themes. Themes were then compared to look for similarities and were grouped into clusters of broad themes. Independent clusters were again analysed to identify the major theme and sub-themes of each cluster, while constantly merging, splitting or regrouping theme in the process. Patterns were identified and codes with similar patterns were merged to form the categories/ sub-themes. Four major themes emerged from the analysis.

## **FINDINGS:**

The following four themes were arrived at as the resilience factors that facilitated the process of leaving the abusive relationship among the participants based on their narratives.

(1) Need to assert their self-worth, (2) Having a hopeful outlook, (3) Capacity for independence and (4) Being able to take initiative and action

These themes are elaborated below with verbatim quotes from the interviews.

Resilience came across not merely as a trait that some women possessed, but in fact as an exceptional ability that these women possessed to endure and recover from the traumatic life experiences they had.

## **NEED TO ASSERT THEIR SELF-WORTH:**

This was one of the strongest factors that the women reported when it came to having a self-realization about the injustice that was happening with them. While the

attempts from the perpetrator to curb these women's self-worth revealed the motive of violence, it was the over-arching presence of the same factor (self-worth) that made them put their foot down to take a decision in the best interest of their own selves. The sense of self in these women was slightly varied depending on and was in tune with their social and cultural factors.

Depending on the differing experiences one had with respect to how good and worthy one felt in a situation, the respondents were also able to identify the ideal situations that they preferred.

### **Quotes of the Participants:**

B, 22 years: I could not stand to see how I was being treated; In fact I told my mother that all he had wanted was a maid servant not a wife. And the regular snubbing that went on in the house, used to make me feel like dirt.

K, 34 years: Even though this has been going on for so many years, somehow I used to feel very angry everything something hurtful happened; I have told myself so many times that I should not hurt myself by keeping quiet; at least not after all that I was trying to do for him.

R, 20 years: Although I wasn't sure if what was happening to me was common in all marriages, I knew this much that I didn't like it.

S, 43 years: Every time I get a performance appraisal report at school, it would boost my spirits. This is one place where I know my ground, and I get what I expect. It makes me feel important and gave me a sense of purpose.

### **HAVING A HOPEFUL OUTLOOK**

Maintaining a positive attitude and having a hopeful outlook helped some of the participants deal with their situations effectively. The expectation that good things would come their way, and that it was only a matter of time before it would happen was one of the ways they displayed hope. Hope was the anchor that helped these women see things in perspective. When there was nothing else to bank on, respondents chose to be hopeful, as it would give them a sense of purpose.

### **Quotes of the Participants:**

M, 22 years: I always keep my trust intact. In general I never give up on anything easily. And although those were difficult times for me - being hurt repeatedly and an invisible hand trying to push me down constantly - I never lost hope. I always believe that better things are in store for me in the future and I look forward to them.

R, 18 years: In spite of all these problems, there have been occasional instances where he has made me feel good. Such situations used to make me feel surprised, but they also help me to continue to hold on; to maintain the hope that my life would improve in the future. Hope and faith see us through a long night to a brighter day.

K, 34 years: At times I would feel all doors are closed. But then the inner me would say, hope and faith in the positive are the only things that can take you ahead in life; they are essential even to live through a day. They were all that I had - Why lose them?

### **CAPACITY FOR INDEPENDENCE**

The participants felt that a woman in a marital relationship is generally seen as being dependent. Further the power dynamics in their relationships emphasized on their need to submit to the spouse. In this point of view, Independence, the feeling in the women that they were individually capable of taking care of their lives was an important factor contributing to how they perceived and responded to violence in their relationship.

### **Quotes of the Participants:**

B, 22 years: The courage to stand for myself and make my own decisions was things my father had always encouraged. I know what I want to do, to have in my life. I don't want someone to dictate terms to me. D, 18 years: Completely resigning me to fate was something I did not completely do at any point of time. Although I was financially dependent on my husband, I used to frequently tell myself that if the need arose at any point of time, I will and should be able to take care of myself.

R, 28 years: Somehow, as my needs had always been taken care of by some male member in the family – my mother and father in childhood, now my husband – I've never learnt to be on my own. But now, this new found sense of freedom; I feel responsible and that feels so good.

### **TAKING INITIATIVE AND ACTION**

Working on what they had planned, with regard to dealing with the violence, was something all the women had done at some point of time or the other. Their responses revealed that while some of them had actively taken initiatives to manage the violence while in the relationship, few others chose moving out of the relationship as being the appropriate action in their situation. One woman reported feeling that it was essential to make the decision by her, because she would feel having been in control of her life, when she looked back and that only she would know what best to

do to feel satisfied with her life. While many of them had been contemplating on the action to be taken and had even decided upon much earlier, taking the initiative to reduce or get away from the perpetrator was a measured step. Due to this, they actively involved in activities which would be of help in getting a temporary relief/ distraction. The women reported that being able to do something productive gave them a sense of accomplishment and a sense of purpose. One woman stood out in her means of dealing with the situation. She reported having involved herself in guiding other deal with their lives in general and the success of the initiatives for them made her feel more hopeful about the same working for her family as well.

### **Quotes of the Participants:**

M, 22 years: I could see that I had to be there for myself at the end of the day because each one has their load of troubles, and no one would be able to do it for me each and every time.

B, 22 years: I saw that leaving my home was not something that would happen in a day. However to pull myself through it each day, I used to keep engaged in listening to music, and with the cattle at home.

S, 24 years: Although these troubles happened almost every day, just brooding over it wasn't going to change anything for me. I would keep myself engaged in cooking different dishes at home and stitching clothes for my child. These things used to make me feel good.

S, 43 years: I am completely different at work and home. I am nicknamed the 'post-box' at school - everyone could pour in their worries to me. I would keep it to myself, but they would feel relieved at the end of it. I take strength from the fact that I am at least able to help them deal with their problems that builds my confidence that someday I can do the same with my life.

### **DISCUSSION**

The factors that influenced the ways in which these women dealt with violence in their lives were not independent of other strategies they would adopt for handling the challenges and problems day to day life. The major factors that came across through the accounts of these women were self-worth, self-assertion, being hopeful, dignity, moving ahead/foreword, thinking positively, being independent, working, problem solving skills, active decision making skills, having sense of accomplishments and altruism. The fact that they displayed immense faith and were able to see possibilities for themselves, which were evident in their decision to leave, were demonstrative of resilience.

Resilience and coping were seen to be emerging as two inter-twined, inseparable concepts that cause and result in each other mutually and further, the capacity for coping in itself emerged as a resilience factor of attempting to handle the situation.

Shantha Kumari et al. (2013)<sup>[8]</sup> in their study on reliance among wives of men with Alcohol Dependence who survived IPV, have reported similar findings focussing more specifically on certain factors, where the women despite feeling disadvantaged due to poverty had expressed feeling confident because of their work and the income they derived from it, as it meant that they could be part of the community they lived in and lead a dignified life. Work seemed to give them the courage and assurance that they would be able to reach higher levels in their lives even without their husband's help and this enhanced their supportive networks.

These findings merge relatively closely with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996)<sup>[9]</sup> model of posttraumatic growth. This model encompasses five domains, which include greater appreciation for life and changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships with others; enhanced feelings of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities for one's life; and spiritual development. By far, the greatest degree of overlap is that participants in this sample described multiple positive changes in both romantic and non-romantic relationships. Changes in relationships emerged in the form of accepting help and seeking support from others, alterations in romantic ideals, new cognitive appraisals of the violent relationship, healthier interactions with ex-partners, novel ways of thinking about and behaving within subsequent romantic relationships, and desires to help other survivors of IPV. In addition, women reported changes in self-perception that included enhanced feelings of strength, independence, confidence, and self-acceptance. These changes in self-perception appeared to be crucial to the formation of posttraumatic growth as well as to both growth and resilience during the stay-leave decision-making process.

Hopper's (2001)<sup>[10]</sup> explored to identify resiliency factors and to examine mechanisms by which resiliency factors operate to prevent intimate partner violence among women. The results revealed that personal and environmental factors, such as cognitive styles, problem-solving abilities, hardiness (i.e., affects how an individual perceives and responds to various situations and events), self-efficacy (i.e., people's belief to exercise control over given events), and social support are directly related to coping and resilience among women. These themes can be seen to have evolved in the present study as well through the women's narratives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For Practice

Survivors of violence in general are a group that needs to be approached with great sensitivity. But in addition to it one another major attitudinal necessity is that of positivism; of strength (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).<sup>[11]</sup> Practitioners need to recognize and affirm women's strengths and sense of agency in surviving abusive relationships.

### For Research

It is important that the profession of social work continues to move away from a bias directed solely at problems and maladjustment and towards a focus on the human capacity to rebound and stay healthy, despite hardship. The shift from a problem-focused model to a focus on protection and strengths would be best suited for working with this target population.

## CONCLUSION

As Humphreys (2003)<sup>[12]</sup> points out, an understanding of the role of resilience is important because such an understanding can help practitioners to build practical strategies, skills or competencies for women to prevent, exit or survive abusive relationships. In addition, assisting the women to recognize their strengths and educating them on how to capitalize on those strengths will elevate their self-esteem and consequently increase resilience.

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