A Qualitative Analysis of the Coping Strategies of Female Victimization After Separation

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Abstract

Victims of high-risk domestic violence in Malaysia return to their husbands if they lack the necessary support to face life challenges, especially after separation. Violence against women is part of the violation of human rights. Therefore, several action strategies are essential to counteract the various pressures of the social injustice they have endured. This qualitative study identifies how victims of domestic violence use coping strategies to face various challenges and pressures after deciding to break up with their spouse. In-depth interviews using purposive sampling and snowball techniques were conducted on 15 female respondents in Penang, Malaysia. Actions including filling in time, positive thinking, seeking formal services assistance, religious approaches, and sharing problems with informal systems successfully reduced the stress and concerns of victims of domestic violence. Enhancing and empowering domestic violence victims about their rights is vital for them to exit the abusive cycle. It is hoped that by understanding their rights as a person, they will be able to resort to better social support systems to overcome their current challenges to better social functioning. Hence, social workers must continuously provide the source of support, including empowering/allowing victims to continuously aware of their rights, which are the most fundamental elements of professional social work practice.

Keywords Female victim · Domestic violence · Intervention strategies

Introduction

Domestic violence carries a variety of definitions that instigate the negative thinking of the victim. These definitions cover numerous forms of power abuse in the context of gender through the intimate relationship of men and women through physical, sexual, economic, and psychological dominance (Mariny et al., 2016). Masarah (2017) concludes that domestic violence involves the domination of gender consisting of negative behaviours based on injustice, especially amongst married women. According to Sharil and Ismail (2013), this aggressive act of domestic violence is perpetrated through physical and mental abuse regardless of the victim's background. Domestic violence in family institutions has also increased human rights value violations (Oyunbileg et al., 2009).

Kishor and Johnson (2004) found that more than 50% of women have been victims of domestic abuse globally. According to the World Health Organization (2013), the results of violence against women who experienced physical and sexual abuse globally showed that Southeast Asia recorded the highest percentage of 37.7% compared to other regions. Based on the report, Malaysia was one of the regions that contributed to women who experience domestic violence.

According to Campbell (2020), domestic violence cases are increasing globally, including in China, France, Brazil, Spain, and United States, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nigam (2020) also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and total lockdown in India have somewhat increased the number of domestic violence amongst women. In the case of Malaysia, domestic violence cases still become a significant concern, although, in 2017, the number of domestic violence cases has declined. The declining number of domestic violence cases in 2017 was due to unreported cases as the victims of domestic violence often are not ready to report their cases to the police (Rauf & Ayob, 2020). Try (2020) revealed that Malaysian women are highly exposed to domestic violence during the lockdown.

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Previous studies have shown that adapting effective measures at the macro level in a country can reduce the issues arising from domestic violence. One such measure adopted and adapted in Malaysia is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Shaharom & Samah, 2017). The Convention emphasised gender equality and female empowerment as tools for measuring legal aspects based on female needs. At the same time, this Convention supports Malaysia's continued efforts to enact new laws on violence against women through the recent amendment to the Domestic Violence Act 1994. Bahadir-Yilmaz and Öz (2018) found a positive significance between the effectiveness of empowerment programme and the use of coping strategies of women exposed to domestic violence. Coping is seen as the most important method in helping to reduce psychological distress and further enhance victims' survival (Mahapatro & Singh, 2020). Therefore, a study related to women's coping strategies at the individual level is highly significant to enhance greater empowerment amongst women at the macro level.

Tumin (2006) explained that domestic violence in Malaysia prior to the 1980s did not involve the intervention of the social system and only involved the police in cases of serious injury and death. In addition, it is considered personal and not discussed openly. This tragic problem often occurs in a home environment which is supposed to be where individuals find basic needs, including protection and love (Muslihah et al., 2016). In Malaysia, Awang and Hariharan (2011) found that factors such as the age of abuse, the victim's income status, and the number of children affect the level of violence in family institutions significantly. In addition, men's use of power over women in the context of communication has led to chronic conflicts between spouses and can contribute to violence and divorce (Marshina Juliza et al., 2015). In addition, social perceptions of a husband's status and their presumed right to dominate women exacerbate the problem (Yulianto, 2016).

Domestic violence harms the victim as well as the existing social environment by threatening mental, social, and physical health and can lead to death. One study has shown that victims experience mental illness, fear, depression, and physical injury that may affect the victim's daily functioning (Gorde et al., 2004). Victims of domestic violence and divorce in Malaysia often suffer from psychological problems or may be involved in a host of other negative symptoms, including drug abuse, prostitution, and criminal activity. The study also found that conflicts between spouses harm immediate social sub-systems such as children. According to Mardiyati (2015), children's development is affected by the psychological trauma experienced through the formulation of violence, causing children to suffer from depression and putting them at high risk of being

abused after adulthood because of the cruel acts perpetrated as a child.

Malaysian females experiencing intimate partner violence need strategies to help function socially (Siti Waringin et al., 2016). This is because action strategies are forms of individual behaviour that can help reduce stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, this qualitative study aims to identify the various coping strategies adopted by female victims of domestic violence after separating from their spouses.

Methodology

Research Design

The plan to continue life without violence becomes more effective if the victim considers the contextual assessment process (Lindhorst et al., 2005). This study adopted an exploratory qualitative study to identify coping strategies used by victims of domestic violence after leaving their partner. It can be used to gain valuable experience from informant participation (Berg-Weger et al., 2001).

Informants

A total of 15 female victims of domestic violence in Penang were recruited for this study. Although few of the victims were originally from different Malaysian states, they were residing in Penang when they participated in the study. Informed consent was also obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Purposive sampling was adopted for selecting informants comprised several criteria, namely (1) the informants were married Malay women who had separated from their partner, (2) the informant had tried to get relief assistance, and (3) the informant is aged 18 years and above. The interview process was conducted at the informant's home according to the informant's decision. The snowball technique was also used to overcome the shortage of samples participating in this study.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interview method through in-depth interviews was applied in this study to obtain the primary data. The first stage focuses on building rapport with the informants before collecting more information on them in the second stage. According to Marican (2006), the interview method provides the opportunity to build rapport and detect the level of acceptance, emotion, and comprehension of the sample. Each interview was conducted in Malay and took an average of between 30 minutes to an hour. In addition to researchers, tape recordings and interview questions were also instrumental in this study to facilitate data analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Each recorded interview was repeated several times before being transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the data in line with the study's objectives. Systematic coding was performed using NVIVO 8 software to generate key themes. Several transcripts were selected verbatim to depict a clear picture of the existence of those themes.

Research Ethics

The information of all informants involved in this study was kept confidential and identified as R1 to R15 to preserve the respondents' human rights. The researchers also ensured that the interview questions did not touch on the respondents' sensitivity. Researchers explained the study's objectives and the right of informants to reject or withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. In the absence of any constraints, informants were asked to complete a consent form to participate in this study. All informants (15 people) participated in the entire interview process.

Findings

Informants' Background

A total of 15 female victims of domestic violence with ages ranging from 20 to 69 years participated in the study. The informants include homeowners, self-employed, and working in the private sector and the government. The background of the victims included those from non-school to diploma level, with income ranges from RM999 and below to RM4999. The study also found that victims of domestic violence were involved in physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse.

Coping Strategies

The results show that victims of domestic violence used five forms of coping strategies to reduce the stress of problems, especially after a divorce. It consists of (1) filling in time, (2) positive thinking, (3) seeking formal services assistance, (4) religious approaches, and (5) sharing problems with informal systems. Each form of action is discussed in detail.

Filling in Time

Twelve out of 15 study participants filled their time by doing various things to distract them from the stresses of domestic violence. Proactive measures are identified through active involvement in various social activities at children's schools,

PIBG associations, and attending UMNO meetings. Engaging in these community activities makes them feel more confident in their current lives without a husband. Here is one example provided by R5:

Today's life, I am active in school and more confident. Like I said, if there are any teachers not enough, there is a group of Chinese association for young people who hard, I went to look for help. Besides, at school, PIBG... I involve in the organisation. Okay active. I'm going to do it. I attend the UMNO meeting...like that. (R5).

Eight informants believed that getting involved in a job helps them earn a monthly income and helps them avoid thinking about their husband's negative attitude towards them. Some of them are willing to take the opportunity to work longer hours and only spend a short time at home for rest. This can prevent them from thinking about the stress they face at home. One informant stated:

I go to work, I leave my problems at home and I do my work with friends. Sometimes, I do OT at a hotel. So, I can spend a short time to go home just to sleep. Tomorrow, I will repeat the same schedule of my life like that. (R11).

Positive Thinking

Nine out of 15 informants expressed positive thoughts when faced with various stressors as a result of domestic violence. They controlled their emotions by considering everything that happens in the environment as a spirit of optimism and ignoring their husbands' disruptions. Informants showed strength and courage in the face of various obstacles. Here is a statement by one respondent:

I remember when coming in the new year of pilgrimage, I woke up that morning and suddenly felt like, 'why am I going down, crying? I have a job, I have a child, I have a father. Why do I have to care what people say? 'Since then, I'm not looking back, I am looking forward. (R3).

Five informants identified children as a source of strength and positivity. Most think that living without a husband's cruelty will guarantee happiness for themselves and their children. Some of the victims found the strength to continue living without a husband after taking into account the emotional needs of their children. The importance of this social system indirectly builds the spirit and mind of the victim to be calmer in the challenges of life, especially after separation. One respondent stated:

If I am depressed, I looked at my kids. I have to be strong. I have to fight. Think of my child. I'm strong because of him. At that time, my child still not die. Oh Allah... I'm powerful, whatever it takes to be the opposite. At the moment my son always says mom, what's up, don't worry... you gotta be strong. You have to be patient. I'm sorry. Forgiven, that is important. So, when we (informants) forgive people, we feel very calm despite this heavy heart. (R5).

Seeking Formal Services

The various forms of stress management assistance faced by the victim encouraged two of the 15 informants to seek professional help. Informants R3 and R5 went to counselling services at the Islamic Religious Department for emotional support and problem-solving. They stated the following:

I told the officer that I had a household problem. I came to get some advice. He (an officer in the Islamic Religious Department) gave me a form and asked to list all my problems. (R3).

I need to find someone who can support me, for who makes me strong and give a solution. That's why I went to a religious office. Ustaz gave counselling to me. (R5).

R5 also sought related social services to uphold social justice in terms of her children's rights from continued abuse by their ex-husband. Actions included making a living claim and reporting a husband's abuse of a child's financial aid to ensure her child's rights are protected. The informant's statement is as follows:

Sometimes when children want something from him (husband), he gave it. If not, he knows what will happen to him. I asked for a living claim from him and he was afraid of that because he will pay a lot if he ignores it. Mis Assyira who is the JKM officer will found out because I went to report on social welfare. At the time, I told Zakat also about this problem. Now JKM has changed it to my name (informant). So, he (husband) doesn't bother yet. (R5).

Religious Approaches

A total of six victims used this approach to alleviate their problems. It can provide spiritual tranquillity to victims of domestic violence, such as via prayer, du'a (the act of supplication to God), reading the Quran, and meditation. Two informants stated:

In the middle of the night I do two-midnight prayers. I express my problems to God because I can't do this to people. (R5).

Okay, I will take this opportunity when my children are not around, I will complain to God. Every night I prayed, I read Al-Quran as much for peace of my mind. I think only God can make me calm down. (R6).

Sharing Problems Through Non-Formal Systems

The majority of 14 informants took the approach of sharing problems to reduce their stress. This study shows that the involvement of various social systems around the victim, including family, friends, and neighbours, provided positive feedback on the victims' problems. Most of the informants spoke about the various problems they encountered and discussed the solution with the family support system,

including their mother, sister, sister-in-law, and father-in-law. Positive feedback in the form of advice and views received by informants improved their confidence when facing life challenges, especially after separation. One respondent stated:

Shared with my mom. I asked her a lot. I saw that she was spirited so I was excited also. She (the mother of the informant) had experienced the same thing. So, that's my spirit. When I (informants) talk to people, I feel my problem was released. At least we're talking to someone. (R3).

Seven informants made their social environment system, like friends, a place to share the various stresses they faced. Most were aware of the victim's suffering because a few had also been victims of domestic violence themselves. The victims are more comfortable sharing the problem with their close friends who spend time together caring for a chronically ill child whilst in hospital. This is because the social system was perceived as being informative. One informant stated:

I share it with those who have same problems like me. Ila (a friend who is also a domestic violence victim) and I together share and talk about our problems. We are having problems like this. She is my friend who is nearby me. (R5).

Discussion

The victims' success in escaping domestic violence is reflected in their ability to cope with various challenges during the divorce phase. This factor is closely related to the coping strategies the victims used to deal with problems and stress. The study found several coping strategies such as filling in time, thinking positively, seeking formal services assistance, using religious approaches, and sharing problems with informal systems.

Actions to Fill in Time

According to the results of the study, victims of violence filled their time with various activities, including working, managing households, and participating in community activities. All victims acknowledged that these various forms of behaviour help prevent them from thinking of the problems that occur due to their husband's cruel behaviour. At the same time, it has helped increase the confidence of the victims to survive because they feel free to do what they want. This is in line with the findings of Ahmad (2012), who found that victims of sexual abuse also took a time-consuming approach by engaging themselves in work. This form of evasion is effective as it reduces the risk of contemplating existing problems. Furthermore, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) touched on the use of forms of action strategies through thinking, feeling, and then acting to manage their desire or environment. In the context of domestic violence, victims

sometimes would take time to think of appropriate ways to deal with stress and problems.

Positive Thinking

The majority of the victims are positive concerning their children's future happiness because their children have the rights to a better life than continuing living in an abusive environment. This source of inspiration not only overcomes the stress of existing problems but also provides strength and comfort for victims to continue living better lives without having to return to their husbands. Brosi and Rolling (2010) found that most victims of violence are often willing to leave their spouse to protect the well-being of children. It is vital to protect children from an abusive environment that can have a dramatic impact on their children's future patterns of communication. Meanwhile, this study used Brofenbrenner's (1979) concept of an ecological approach to understand the influence of the behaviour of victims of domestic violence on self-development. This is because interactions with social systems act as agents of change that reject negative thoughts about the culture of domination of the husband's power within the family institution.

Furthermore, individual aspects of the environment (person-environment) are essential to understand the forms of positive thinking through various interrelated dimensions, including biological, emotional, social, cognitive, spiritual, and physical (Germain & Gitterman, 1980). The victims in this study used cognitive dimensions to form positive thoughts to reduce the stress of problems. Thus, the various advantages of the self and the surrounding environment make it a mechanism of strength and enthusiasm towards optimising the social functioning of the victim.

Seeking Formal Service Assistance

Victims' actions to seek various forms of professional help, whether from governmental or private entities, became a coping strategy to escape the domestic violence problem. They gained strength through emotional support, justice, and social welfare towards the best possible solution to the problems they faced. Furthermore, understanding female Malay victims in this study regarding aspects of Islamic law are important to help them enforce their social justice through divorce and alimony claims against children. This is because Islam is a religion that provides a solution to all kinds of problems facing human beings (Abd Hamid et al., 2004). Abd Rahim et al. (2008) argued that the Malay family institution crisis could be avoided through gender roles in household management. The concept of Islamic shariah amongst couples needs to be considered to enhance their understanding of the principles of Islam that are fundamental to the

life of the victim and the surrounding community towards achieving well-being.

Religious Approaches

The victims also applied the Islamic approach to achieve spiritual peace to overcome the challenges of violence. Such coping included performing compulsory prayers, *du'a*, reciting the Qur'an, and meditating for peace of mind. At the same time, the victims emphasised the concept of "accepting fate" for everything that had happened and "*tawakkal*" when trying to navigate their path to recovery. As a result, all victims are relieved after exposing all their suffering to God because they believe that God can resolve their misery. It is in line with the understanding that a firm grip on moral principles drives a high degree of confidence because Islam is the only religion that offers solutions to the various problems faced by people (Abd Hamid et al., 2004). The results of Hassouneh-Phillips (2003) study of a sample of Muslim women in America showed that spiritual aspects shaped the choice of action. This is because spirituality can either increase strength in Muslim women who are victims of domestic violence. According to the study, the victims involved in this form of force gained the strength to live a more peaceful life. Religious approaches can be used as emotion-focused coping for peace, as Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stated.

Sharing Problems with Non-Formal Systems

Goodman and Epstein (2005) and Goodman et al. (2005) described social support as one of the most important sources of support for women who experienced violence by their partners. This is because victims seek support to address issues whilst managing their partners more effectively (Taft et al., 2007). This study also found that sharing problems with close relatives such as family members, neighbours, and close friends is one of the most commonly used strategies towards a more fulfilling life. The positive feedback received by the victims shows that various social systems reject the ideology of gender violence through husband domination and caused harm to the victim and children. This is important because Sabina and Tindale (2008) showed that victims of violence need a form of encouragement that supports their perspective as a victim and emphasises their value in themselves. The researchers found that problem-solving involves two-way communication about safety needs, emotional support, and useful ideas for solving the problem that victims face. This is in line with Brosi and Rolling (2010), in which most informants received practical and emotional support from social sources, including family members and friends who had decided to terminate that relationship.

Suggestions and Conclusions

Forms of coping strategies include filling in the space of time, positive thinking, seeking formal services assistance, religious approaches, and sharing problems with the informal system, which can alleviate the stress and problems faced by victims of domestic violence. Applying these coping mechanisms based on individual aspects and social environment systems motivates victims of domestic violence to escape from these problems.

This study proposes the effectiveness of formal social service agencies to help solve the problem faced by victims. The primary intervention should focus on making the victims understand their rights as a person, thus empowering them to handle their problems more effectively and then adopt social change for better social functioning and well-being. At the micro-level, social workers need to analyse the forms of behaviour used to deal with stressors, whether emotionally focused or problematic. This analysis allows social workers to focus on emotional and cognitive beliefs to generate positive behaviours so that victims do not return to their partners. All of these can be achieved when the social workers hold on to human rights principles and give victims freedom to share their problems and action plan towards self-functioning through individual and group interventions. If intervention is in a group, victims' involvement can be traced through their sharing problems, experiences, emotional support, goals, actions, and so on. This is because they are from the same problem group and need support from each other. This method emphasises the need for social support amongst victims of violence to produce more effective communication and dissemination of information based on victims' needs. These actions can be carried out by social workers using creative knowledge, values, and basic social work skills (Johnson, 1992).

Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. Based on human rights principles, social workers should also focus on informal social support, including family members, neighbours, and friends, as a source of strength for victims to resolve stress in the intervention. This target group system is important because it helps to meet the victim's basic needs for better social change. Therefore, the proposed intervention at the meso level should involve people closest to the victim as a target system to continuously support and empower the victim to overcome the dilemma of improving their social well-being.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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