An Exploration of the Nature of Informal Social Support Received by Women Experiencing Domestic Violence

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Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious, widespread social problem with mental health consequences for victimized women of all cultural and ethnic groups. Victims of IPV, who are overwhelmingly women, are at a high risk for mental health problems (Carlson, McNutt & Choi, 2002). Social support, or the provision of emotional, psychological, and physical resources by family, friends, and others, has been associated with psychological well-being across a variety of populations and has been studied extensively as a buffer to negative outcomes for abused women (Coker, et al., 2002). Research has shown consistently that among IPV victims, social support is related to positive mental health outcomes, lower levels of self-blame, higher quality of life, willingness and ability to seek formal support and physical safety (ibid., 2002; Goodman et al., 2005). Perhaps most important, the support of family and friends can be instrumental in helping IPV victims to end the violence in their relationships (Rose, Campbell & Kub, 2000). However, social support always does not come in a positive form. Past research also indicates that in contrast to positive reactions, the negative effects of critical interpersonal interactions often have a stronger effect on the individual than do the positive effects of supportive interactions. Nevertheless, only a few examinations of social support among victims of IPV have examined positive and negative social support separately, and hardly any studies have explored whether and how the support rendered differ according to the type of IPV the women experience. Psychological abuse, which is lost to the outside world is less obvious, even though the consequences may be more emotionally devastating than physical abuse it might elicit different reactions from informal support network members such as family and friend than reactions to physical abuse which can result in serious physical injuries quite obvious to the outside world.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the current study was to explore the nature of social support the abused women received from their informal support network members. The specific objectives are:

- to assess their level of satisfaction on the amount and type of support received,
- to examine whether the supportive behaviour differ depending on the type of domestic violence; mainly psychological and physical violence instigated by their partners.

Methodology

Multiple-case study design was chosen for the study that was on a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, where the researcher had no possibility to control the events. Fifteen case studies, chosen through purposive sampling, were conducted using informal in-depth interview as the major mode of data collection. The participants were predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist married women with children in the age group of 23 to 42 years. All the participants were subject to many forms of psychological as well as physical abuse.

Key Findings

Findings of the present study show that all the women who experience IPV have confided in someone close to them before deciding to ask for formal social support. Findings also indicate that they have received mixed reactions, both positive (e.g. listening, asking questions, offering to intervene, providing feedback and facilitating helpful activities) and negative (e.g. not believing the victim, blaming the victim, refusing to intervene or being too frightened themselves to intervene) from family, neighbors and friends as initial reactions to their disclosures of abuse, positive ones being more frequent than negative ones. However, with time the provision of social support has changed, negative reactions becoming more frequent than positive ones. This could be because as the abuse may be chronic, abused women over time may deplete the emotional and material resources of providers as shown in past research (Thompson et al., 2000). For example, many women reported that friends and family have responded in a variety of hurtful ways, ranging from telling the victim to put up with the situation, criticizing them, getting distant, asking the

victim to solve their personal family problems by themselves to outright victim blaming. Majority of the women in the study were unhappy and dissatisfied with informal support they received. They were disappointed of the reactions of the supporters whom they thought were close to them and would help them. For various reasons, otherwise supportive individuals appear to be unable to provide support related to the abuse. In addition to the abuser-imposed isolation, abused women have encountered family and friends who have not believed their reports of abuse, who felt uncomfortable discussing this sensitive topic, or who thought that it is not right to intervene in family matters. Some of these individuals who were reluctant to help also had their own relationships with the abusers and, as a result, preferred to refrain from "choosing sides." Some were reluctant to help as they have been subjected to threats and harassment from the abusive partner. These dangers may appear to cause network members to move away from survivors or even to blame them. Most of these factors have been observed in other settings as well (e.g., ibid, 2000). It may be that these network members wanted to limit their involvement to preserve their own safety. However, a marked difference appears when social reactions to disclosures of psychological abuse are compared with the reactions to incidents of physical abuse. Whereas efforts to help and direct intervention (i.e., coming forward for rescue, calling 119) was common in case of physical abuse, moving away from getting involved in the scene, advising to tolerate the abuse, justifying the man's behaviour (i.e., 'men are like that..'), getting distant from the abused woman, blaming the woman, criticizing the woman, and taking the incidents of abuse very lightly (i.e., 'He didn't hit you...did he?) was the most frequent forms of social reactions for disclosures of incidents of psychological abuse. These negative reactions appear to make women depressed, self blame themselves, to stay entrapped leading to a lesser quality of life.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that psychological abuse is a highly damaging form of victimization, it seems that social support net work members consider it less damaging than physical abuse most probably because it is less apparent to those outside the relationship. Support providers seem to offer support depending on the degree of perceived physical threat to the abused woman's life. More the obvious physical threat, more willing the supporters have become in helping the victim get out of danger intervening in the conflict sometimes even risking the safety of their lives. The notion that 'it's a matter of

life and death' seem to propel the informal supporters to intervene in serious physical violence episodes to save the life of the victim. However, psychological abuse has not garnered the same amount of attention from the informal supporters, may be because it does not result in serious physical injuries, but in more inward devastating emotional injuries. The Available data, however provides a strong need for support from informal supporters to combat psychological abuse. The participants experiencing both the types of abuse strongly feel that they do not receive sufficient support from the ones whom they thought would help. Programmes aimed at increasing the awareness of the importance of social support among women's informal support networks and of understanding the detrimental impact of psychological abuse, as well as of IPV in general is a strongly recommended.

Keywords: Intimate Partner; Psychological Abuse; Physical Abuse; Social Support; Violence

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