

PALESTINIAN GENOCIDE AND SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS AMONG PAKISTANI MOTHERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

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The ongoing conflict in Palestine has reverberated across the globe, manifesting not only in political discourse but also in the psychological well-being of distant observers. This qualitative study delves into the secondary traumatic stress (STS) experienced by Pakistani mothers as they consume media reports and narratives of the Palestinian situation. Secondary traumatic stress, a condition often shadowing those indirectly exposed to trauma through close contact with survivors or through extended exposure to traumatic narratives, emerges as a significant concern for mental health professionals. By focusing on a specific demographic—Pakistani mothers—this research aims to uncover the nuanced psychological impacts of distant conflicts on individuals with no direct connection to the events, other than through ethnic, religious, or humanitarian concern. The research explored mothers' experiences and insights of secondary traumatic stress in context of Palestinian on-going war/violence. The study's participants comprise a diverse group of nine Pakistani mothers, varying in age, socioeconomic status (SES), education level, profession, marital status, number of children, and family structure. This demographic diversity provides a broad lens through which the phenomenon of STS can be examined, offering insights into how various factors might influence psychological responses to distant traumas. The insights were collected through semi-structured interviews looking into the psychological, emotional and behavioral perspectives. The study investigated how the secondary traumatic stress caused by the disturbing war-stricken Palestinian images and video clips which are found everywhere on media. Findings clearly indicated the fear, stress, uncertainty, anxiety and concern for family expressed by the mothers. Mostly the participants (mothers) expressed that due to the current situation they made efforts for a stronger and closer bonding with their children and family. They emphasized the importance of freedom and peace in their home country and extend their gratitude toward the Almighty Allah. The findings would help to make people literate of secondary trauma and suggest healthier ways to cope it.

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INTRODUCTION

Gaza - a land of helplessness and power-political massacre which has brought Israel as the most inhuman, stubborn and ruthless nation on the face of world map. Since mid of the last century the world has witnessed tensions and instances of violence and attacks involving both the sides. There have been a number of unsuccessful attempts between the Israeli government and Palestinian authorities to negotiate for peace in the region. The Israel-Palestinian conflict has significant economical and geo-political consequences. Global crude oil supply could be disrupted affecting the region and resulting in increase in oil prices globally. The conflict has changed the status of the owners of land (Palestinians) to non-citizens in their own country violating human rights. The conflict has emotional backlash also with anti-Jewish and anti-American sentiments across the world mainly Muslims. United Nation has come up as a helpless body overruled by veto power against their every voice raised for the unlimited human rights violation (Brader, 2023; Center for Preventive Action, 2024; Reuveny, 2003).

The recent spate of war could probably be called the worst of all ruthless acts by any war-engaged-nation. Tensions between the two have increased during 2023, contemplating another 'intifada' - refers to two previous uprisings in 1978 and 2000 by Palestinians against Israel. The recent surge of violence started in October 2022 and with those images of human sufferings especially children started pouring in through social media which shook the whole world. Various media houses and newspapers reported both sides of the story with highly disturbing images especially of dead and wounded Palestinian children. The massive outreach of social media has broadcasted these real images really fast which traumatized the whole world. The impact of such images is not only limited to the primary sufferers but also affected the ones who are not directly involved but are psychologically affected by the exposure to the images - secondary trauma (Harb et al., 2024; Zaki, 2011).

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is a stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a suffering or traumatized individual. It is a behavioral consequence occurring after knowledge about a traumatic happening experienced by a significant person (Figley, 1995). It is an emotional duress caused when a person hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another (Canfield, 2005; Armes et al., 2020). Globally, humans experience STS when they hear or watch people enduring trauma of abuse, violence, natural disasters and adverse events like accidents and wars. These experiences can significantly impact emotional and behavioral problems. If an intense and persistent stress comes with indirect exposure to trauma - even discussions of traumatic events cause trauma to the listener (Saba Harouni Lurie). STS intensifies if the person can relate closely to the primary victims, it is also known as vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue (Ayer et al., 2015; Dubow et al., 2012; Hopwood et al., 2019). A recent study declared that more than half of Palestinian adults are found positive for depression including 71% living in Gaza. And the number of silent sufferers as a result of secondary-trauma would probably be uncountable. Any human with any bias of religion, race, and identity would bleed their hearts out at those Palestinian children's traumatic images. People around the world enjoying family-time were forced to think about their own children when such images are splattered across their TV or phone screens (Altawil et al., 2023; Ronzani et al., 2024). Theoretical approaches propose connections between such political violence and psychological well-being.

Hobfoll's theory (1989) of conservation of resource states that individual psychological responses vary on the basis of degree of resource loss (whether social, financial, material or personal). The greater the resource loss, the greater the psychological impact. Social-cognitive-ecological perspective establishes that child's psycho-social wellbeing is greatly affected by the exposure to violence and the type of violence the child is exposed to (Dubow et al., 2009). Parental especially mother's instinct is same across the board for all human and animal species. The instinct implies that there is an inborn knowledge and set of caring behaviors that are part of being a mother (Monk et al., 2008). Mothers have found to be loving, caring and empathetic and have a strong maternal love to feel pain for her child (Kikuchi & Noriuchi, 2015; Takseve, 2017; Leahy, 2023). Mothers being females have a higher tendency to feel stressed out and transfer their stress to their child and family (Assel et al., 2002). Mothers develop a strong feeling for other mothers, they tend to feel their joy, happiness, anxieties and pain (Tosun et al., 2020). They have found to form a strong bond by sharing their motherhood experiences (Flacking et al., 2006). It's more likely that a mother watching these images could strongly feel the pain of what Palestinian mothers are battling. With this notion, the current study aimed to investigate the effect of Palestinian-violence induced secondary trauma among Pakistani mothers.

A literature gap was found where Pakistani mothers have been studied in relation to various mental stressors like chronic illnesses, covid-19, childbirth, post-partum and during pregnancy, and parental stress but not with secondary trauma experienced by them (Ahsan et al., 2023; Ikram et al., 2022; Chaudhry et al., 2022).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To find out the impact of secondary traumatic stress related to Palestinian conflict on Pakistani mothers.
2. To determine the impact of media exposure on Palestinian situation and its impact on non-directly involved population.

QUALITATIVE APPROACH

To carry out the study, qualitative approach was chosen. Qualitative research involves induction process which starts with data collection and construction of different concepts and theories from the collected data. A qualitative approach allowed the

researcher for in-depth and meaningful knowledge gain from the participants' tapping on their beliefs and feelings as opposed to quantitative approach.

INTERVIEW

Semi-structured interviews were carried out for this study. On one hand semi-structured interviews allowed the participants the flexibility to elaborate more on their input and on the other hand provided researcher to delve deep into the information while probing. Interview approach was also selected as the topic was sensitive and complex to understand the secondary trauma. Though the interview process is time consuming and has an inherent risk of researcher bias (Bergelson et al., 2022); it is further difficult to justify the small number of participants and low reliability of the data (Krippendorff, 2004).

SAMPLING

The researcher utilized convenience sampling method to engage participants. The inclusion criteria was based on participants who are mothers, married and having at least one child. Both stay-home-moms and working women were taken as sample. The average age of the sample was 33.8 years, having different levels of education and family structure. Participants belonged to middle and upper-middle / upper socio-economic class.

Participants were sought through personal contacts of the researcher. Initially ten participants were recruited to be interviewed; however one withdrew from taking part due to the sensitive nature of the study. The participants presented very different perspective and feelings on the research topic.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection took place in February 2024. A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews and all interviews were fully transcribed verbatim. Two of the nine participants were acquaintances of the researcher; the other seven were recruited through third parties known to the researcher. All participants were contacted through cell phone with the purpose of the study. The participants who agreed to become part of the study chose to have interviews carried out in their homes, where they felt ease and thus spoke more openly on the topic. The researcher had a series of questions in a general form of interview however the sequence of question could vary depending on the

responses she received. The significant replies were further probed and additional question were asked for clarity on participants perspectives (Bryman et al., 2008; Mertens, 2018).

After initial rapport building, interview schedule was prepared in advance to facilitate the researcher with the flow of the interview (appendix II). Each participant was presented with a similar set of questions relating to their overall experiences of violence and trauma. Open-ended questions were asked; an example is '*What do you understand by violence? Have you heard or seen violence?*' Open-ended questions allow participants more space to express their feelings and thoughts especially with such a sensitive topic (Sarantakos, 1988). The researcher kept the conversation bi-lingual (English and Urdu) making it comprehensible and relevant to each of the participant (Bryman & Burgess, 2002).

The interview schedule was structured into the following five sections;

- ✓ Participant's demographics
- ✓ Their understanding of violence
- ✓ Their experiences (direct and indirect) of violence
- ✓ Their exposure to Palestinian violence
- ✓ Their psychological/emotional well-being,
- ✓ Their thoughts, opinions and actions related to the Palestinian conflict
- ✓ Their empathetic response to the conflict

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was transcribed, then coded, analyzed, interpreted and verified. The process of transcribing the interviews can help the researcher to gain more understanding of the subject from repeatedly listening to and reading the transcribed interviews (Bailey, 2008). Coding the data began once all the data was fully transcribed. The codes applied are keywords which are used to categorize or organize text and are considered an essential part of qualitative research (Sarantakos, 1998). The data was then analyzed, categorized and organized into themes. The themes which emerged were assigned a specific code accordingly (Lacey & Luff, 2001). The next stage involved interpreting the data by identifying any reoccurring themes throughout and highlighting any similarities and differences in the data. The final stage involved data verification, this process involves a process of checking validity of understanding by rechecking the transcripts and codes again, thus

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allowing the researcher to verify or modify hypotheses already arrived at previously (Grace, 2015). The data saturation point was reached at the seventh interview but to validate the point of saturation (Mwita, 2022), three more interviews were conducted; out of which one interviewee declined in between the interview process, hence the researcher was left with a total of nine interviews data.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical consideration were followed by the researcher. These includes confidentiality of the participants, participation was purely on voluntarily basis, and they were presented with a consent form giving details of the research objectives and a trigger-warning was also given to them since the topic is related to violence and trauma. Participants were also informed about their right of withdrawal. Prior setting up for the time and venue of the interview with an outline of the topic was also discussed with the participants in advance. They were told that at the end of the interview session, they can ask any question related to the topic.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researcher identified some limitation during the process of the study. Most notably, the small number

of participants meant less generalizability (Boddy, 2016; Carminati, 2018). However the data collection technique of semi-structured interviews have proved to be useful in gaining in-depth and rich data. Interview technique provide researcher to extract information in an open and honest way in order to gain insight into the nine participants perspectives and opinions on violence and trauma in general followed by Palestinian-violence as secondary trauma experiences.

Researcher bias could be a larger limitation in the study. One cannot completely eliminate researcher bias but attempt to minimize it so to achieve valid findings leading toward rich interpretation (Chenail, 2011; Noble & Smith, 2015).

FINDINGS

Main themes were drawn out of the descriptive data and put for subsequent analysis. Demographic profiling of the nine participants have been provided in Table1. The key emerged themes were: exposure and experiences of violence, witness to violence, empathy towards victims, behavioral and emotional reactions towards exposure to Palestinian violence, persecution of Muslims, psychological impact / fear, anti-Israel feelings and behavioral acts of boycott towards Israeli products, impact of Palestinian violence on parental bonding (Tanvir, 2023; Sarfaraz, 2023).

Table 1: Demographic Profiling of the Participants

S#	AGE	SES	EDUCATION	PROFESSION	MARITAL STATUS	NO. OF CHILDREN	FAMILY STRUCTURE
1	30	Middle	Under graduate	House wife	Married	3	Nuclear
2	24	Middle	Graduate	Working	Married	1	Joint
3	46	Middle	Under graduate	House Wife	Married	5	Nuclear
4	24	Middle	Under graduate	Housewife	Married	2	Joint
5	36	Upper middle class	Masters	Working	Married	2	Nuclear
6	35	Middle class	Graduate	House wife	Married	2	Joint
7	30	Middle class	Masters	Working	Married	1	Nuclear
8	35	Upper class	Graduate	Working	Married	2	Joint
9	45	Upper class	PhD	Working	Married	2	Nuclear

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. Exposure and Experiences of Violence

All of the participants admitted that they have been exposed, seen, heard and discussed about violence. One participant described the concept of violence as:

'Well, in my perception violence is when someone is tortured, beaten or thrashed against his will & without a permissible cause. Yes, I have observed violence and have seen multiple exposures in my surroundings in closer vicinity when without a legit cause someone was beaten.'

(Participant #2)

Another participant talked about personal experiences of domestic violence:

'Yes, I have experienced mental torture and to some extent physical violence where I was forced to stay quiet & face the irrational demands of my husband and in laws. Moreover, I have listened from many colleagues who all have remained victim of violence at some phase of life.'

(Participant #8)

2. Witness to Palestinian Violence

All of the participants have been exposed to the on-going Palestinian violence and shared their feelings and thoughts about it.

'Yes, I have ample exposure to such horrible violence, this cold-blooded genocide has grave effect on my soul. It was revealed through SMNs that Palestine has been attacked, upon surfing through internet I came across many horrible videos. It needs a lot of courage to watch such stuff, so after few videos I couldn't withstand such heinous crimes.'

(Participant #3)

'I believe if I ever have to face such challenge, I'll give up too early or even I will crumble under stress too easily, I'm thankful to almighty for the freedom and secure environment that I don't have to face such brutality.'

(Participant #5)

3. Empathy towards Victims

Participants expressed greater empathy with people of Palestinians dead or alive. They said they could

feel the agony and pain the victims are going through. They stated that watching all those images make them feel sad and depressed to the extent that they have started avoiding the video clips and pictures posted on social media.

'Initially I was curious to explore the actual situation going across the Palestine, but after multiple exposures I had to withdraw from those brutal encounters of armed forced where even women & children were not spared. Nobody can withstand such cruelty & now I have decided to avoid any such video or news because it makes me depressed and pessimistic for days.'

(Participant #4)

'I can feel what mothers are going through such horrendous situations. I feel sad when I think of mothers.'

(Participant #1)

'Since I have seen the kids videos where they were bombed brutally and in such a young age without knowing their mistake they were put to death, I feel myself more empathetic. I feel sometimes insecure that this world has lost the tangible wits to understand the humanity.'

(Participant #5)

4. Behavioral and Emotional Reactions towards Exposure to Palestinian Violence

'Though my daily routine goes as normal but whenever I watch it, I feel helplessness and anger towards the people causing this suffering. It is a matter of humanity and human right rather than religion.'

(Participant #9)

'I wonder and feel the pain of mothers of those children who are dead or badly injured. I feel so sad after watching all those video clips and images on social media. I wonder how they are living such a life which is surrounded by fear and death only!'

(Participant #3)

'Even one exposure is enough for days where I even lost my appetite and couldn't gather courage to see it again in coming days. I believe after watching these videos, it is very hard to behave normal for few hours because it effects your soul.'

(Participant #2)

5. Persecution of Muslims

Participants strongly felt that it is a suffering and violence targeted towards Muslim since centuries. Muslims are being oppressed and victim to brutality. A knowledgeable participant put her views like:

'Well maybe I'm a frequent reader and well informed about the global happenings, I do follow all SMNs adequately and come across such news frequently now a days, in my humble opinion such actions are spreading hatred among the Muslim community across the world which will infuse more passion and energy to avenge such brutality. It's not about Palestine rather it has deep rooted effect from the history when it is evident that why always Muslims become victim of such brutality. Even this all brutality is against the Geneva Convention guidelines.'

(Participant #6)

6. Psychological Impact / Fear

'I sometimes cry after watching those videos and feel that I cannot help them in any way.'

(Participant #7)

'Watching the destroyed houses and buildings, wounded children and crying fathers and mothers is all too much to handle and cause me a lot of mental stress.'

(Participant #1)

'It has adverse effect on everyone in some way or the other, it is so disturbing and terrifying that I have seen people crumbling to deep silence and even having access to their unconscious where their own exposures of brutalities were hidden. It makes me sad and depressed.'

(Participant #7)

'Oh Allah the Merciful'. It's even hard to imagine for me, Allah forbid if I ever had to face such situation it would be heartbreaking for me. I have seen many years of my life but I'm concerned about my children and family and yes, the generation to come. It would be terrifying and it makes me feel helpless but I would fight for the right cause and I'll fight for my country and children. May Allah protect us all from such situations and testing times!'

7. Anti-Israel Feelings and Behavioral Acts of Boycott towards Israeli Products

'Well, I personally believe since we belong to third world country and here everything is followed as per the class system of society, I have seen people still using the same products of Israel origins as before, but in my personal capacity I'm following the policy to boycott Israeli products and I try to inculcate the same among my family members.'

(Participant #6)

'I and my whole family are active in the boycott campaign of Israeli products as this is the least we could do to help our Palestinian brothers and sisters.'

(Participant #3)

'Yes, probably this is the only way to help the sufferers.'

(Participant #9)

8. Impact of Palestinian Violence on Parental Bonding

Participating mothers feel the suffering of Palestinian children very close to their hearts and they felt that their bonding with their children has become more intensified. They feel the fear that God forbid their children have to experience such violence.

'I feel pain after watching those video clips and images. I feel gratitude towards Allah that me and my children are living safely and do not have to go through such pains. I am thankful to Allah that we are living in an independent country.'

(Participant #8)

'I have become over protective towards my children, I prefer them playing inside the house.'

(Participant #1)

'Definitely I bow my head to Allah Almighty for all the blessings I have been bestowed upon. Indeed freedom is the biggest of them all and now after watching the brutality and cruelty all across the globe I feel myself in more gratitude and indebted to my forefathers for their sacrifices. It has strengthened my relationship with Allah Almighty.'

(Participant #4)

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

All participants revealed that they have been exposed to violence directly or indirectly. They all felt extreme sympathy towards Palestinian mothers and children facing brutality and death every day. As reflection most of the participants now value their freedom, security and safety of their families. They get anxious when they think of anything like that happening to their families especially children. Participants who are working mothers reflect further than they now want to spend more quality time with their children and make efforts to make them feel safe, loved and cared for. All the participants vow to continue boycott of Israeli products as a way to support their Palestinian brothers and sisters.

DISCUSSION

The main objectives of the research were to explore the impact of media exposure related to Palestinian conflict and the secondary traumatic stress it is causing to Pakistani mothers. The findings of this study are based on the interpretation and analysis of data obtained through the process of semi-structured interviews of nine participants. Exposure to violence of any kind is a common happening for Pakistani mothers (Khan, 2020; Yazdani et al., 2016). The violence could be their own experiences, the one they witnessed happening to someone around (neighbors, family members) and through media (news & entertainment). The experiences could be verbal, visual, physical, emotional and psychological violence (Van der Kolk, 2003; Mandelli et al, 2015). As anticipated, empathy towards Palestinian victims, feelings of fear and insecurity towards their families especially children emerged as major themes across all nine interviews. The findings of the study elaborated the psychological construct of secondary trauma - incurred when an individual is exposed to people who have been traumatized themselves, disturbing descriptions of traumatic events by a survivor, or others inflicting cruelty on one another (Giller, 1999; Kirmayer et al., 2010).

The findings strengthened the notion the very existence of secondary traumatic stress (STS) inflicted through media (Bourke & Craun, 2014; Kennedy, 2022). The research focused specifically on the on-going Palestinian violence and the media presence it got through disturbing violent images and video clips (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998; Barker & Petley, 2002; Cantor & Wilson, 2003; Feinstein et al.,

2014). This media presence on one hand has brought the global attention to the brutality and the war crimes happening there but also the long lasting effect of it on people who are indirect victims to it. The mother population was selected with the reason being they are considered to be more empathetic towards violence and human suffering, more stress-prone and tend to be found more affected by media-exposed-violence (Diamond et al., 2012; Pang et al, 2023; Löffler & Greitemeyer, 2023). Another factor which led the study to be inclined towards mothers is because the images and video clips surfaced about Palestinian conflict are mostly children either dead or badly wounded and traumatized (Fassin, 2008; Klucznik et al., 2016).

The findings revealed that the media presence of Palestinian violence has been viewed by the participants and affected them in various ways (Huesmann, 2007; Anderson & Bushman, 2018). It was found that the exposure to violence have affected their emotional and psychological well-being. It has also impact their relationship and bonding with their children (Fuchs, et al., 2015). As a result of this STS, they felt negative emotions towards any product linked with Israel and acted upon the call for boycotting those products/brands (Cossío-Silva et al., 2019; Tanvir, 2023; Sarfaraz, 2023).

The psychological impact of secondary trauma left the participants in pain and even to the extent that they felt like isolating themselves and going for a long-silent period where they preferred not to talk or interact with anybody (Pinchevski, 2016; Neria & Sullivan, 2011; Holman, 2020). The feeling of helplessness among mothers were also reported where they sensed the agony of those mothers in the war zone and they pain those mothers of dead or wounded children must be going through (Lyons-Ruth et al, 2033). One of the participants even reported to have suffered insomnia and loss of appetite post watching those video clips especially of a traumatized child who was shivering non-stop out of the trauma the child had gone through.

Another factor emerging from the study findings was that all participants seemed unsure about the future of Palestinian children and of Muslim world (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 29th November 2023, retrieved on 23rd March 2024). Some expressed resentment towards western world for supporting Israeli war crimes and causing agony to the human race (Yara, 2023; Hasan, 2024). What was surprising from analyzing the data obtained through this study was where one of the participants acknowledged that this

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is a genocide targeted towards Muslims and it will not stop in Gaza and will spread across the globe; and that this thought make her highly concerned about the safety and security of her family and also for the Muslim community. Another participant expressed her concern where she senses it all happening very soon and very close to her as well.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the research to explore the impact of Palestinian violence-laden-image/videos as a secondary traumatic stress on Pakistani mothers. The findings revealed that the secondary trauma was highly significant enough to load Pakistani mothers' psychologically, emotionally and behaviorally. The participants felt a sense of fear, uncertainty and sense

that this on-going war is close to their hearts and would involve their families soon. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their deep felt emotions, insights and perceptions about the violence. They were well aware of the trauma caused by war-torn Palestinians. They all felt empathetic generally towards Palestinians and specifically towards the mothers who have lost their children and the war seemed no-stopping very soon. The findings of the study are relevant to the psychological effects of secondary traumatic stress and highlight the personal impact which violence has on an individual. The significance of the STS and its far-reaching impact out of geographical boundaries is what world needs to understand and should put real efforts to stop this genocide.

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