

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE OF MASCULINITY IN
DEVELOPMENT OF SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG MEN: A CASE
STUDY OF DISTRICT DIR LOWER**

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Abstract

Masculinity is one of the core contributing factors to suicidal behaviors (Samaritans, 2012). Framed under qualitative research design, the current study investigates into the role of masculinity in driving men towards suicidality. This study has been conducted in District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Purposive sampling technique has been used to select samples from the population of interest. A total of 20 men having the history of an attempted suicide were sampled and interviewed through an interview guide. The collected information has been analyzed thematically. Findings show that masculinity plays an eminent role in developing suicidal behavior among men. Unemployment, unrespectable job, failure in achieving economic success, and failure in fulfilling role and responsibilities of being man damages machismo and leads to suicidality among men. In addition, bodily expressions e.g. strong physique, drug abuse, fighting and risk-taking behaviors contributes to development of suicidal behaviors among men.

Keywords: *Suicide; Masculinity; Behavior; Role and Responsibilities; Unemployment; Bodily Expressions*

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Masculinity is a broadly used term in social sciences (Connell, 2002). Masculinity refers to the organization of society around the outlook of men. It includes collection of various articulations, behaviors, expressions, roles and responsibilities, expectations, acts, deeds and occupations concerning men (Brike, 2000; Connell, 2002; Kendall, 2007). Men in each society live according to the mentioned components of masculinity (e.g. see Walter, 2010). For example, men show different levels of passiveness, aggressiveness, happiness, strength and weakness etc. (Connell, 2002). Therefore, masculinity is variable which means that it is a changeable phenomenon with regard to cultures, individuals as well as even with age i.e. masculinity varies with age such as at young age or older age men acts differently. Masculinity also relates with social context i.e. dominancy of masculinity varies across society and culture or even at local level e.g. at school and at home (Connell, 2006, 2008; Kendall, 2007).

Varying level of masculinity associates with suicide related behaviors (Samaritans, 2012). For instance, in most of societies economic aspects are linked with masculinity such as it is the job of men to earn and take economic care of the family. Men are expected to respond aggressively, and protect family members from external threats. Men are expected to provide education and health related needs to their children, wife and elders of the family. Therefore, every man is afraid of unemployment. As a result of unemployment, men become vulnerable to various stressor, anxieties and depression which pave way for development of suicide related behaviors.

Another important aspect with regard to the role of masculinity in development of suicidality is hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a combination of ideal articulations, acts, expectations, roles and responsibilities, deeds, behaviors and activities attached with men in a given social structure i.e. each man wants to be physically strong, have a respectable job, have

fame, and recognized social status (for further details see Connell and Messerschmedt, 2005). In other terms, hegemonic masculinity is a type of masculinity that is preferred and valued in any culture (Samaritans, 2012). Many studies revealed that hegemonic masculinity in particular is responsible for development of suicidal behavior among men. Each and every man want to be an ideal man, for instance, every man wants to have a good and respectable job, economic independence, self-sufficiency, a recognized social status; and, every man want to provide basic and standard facilities to their families. In addition, every man wants to have a good physical body (e.g. strong and attractive body) and expressive talking style. However, failure in achieving the indicators of the mentioned attributes of hegemonic masculinity leads to suicidality among men. Research studies explain a simple mechanism behind the role of hegemonic masculinity in developing suicidal behavior among men. For instance, failure in achieving the attributes related to hegemonic masculinity results in stress, anxieties, depression among men. These consequences independently result in suicidality among men as well as leads to drug abuse, aggressiveness, familial tensions, and stigmatization which also contributes to development of suicidal behaviors. For further explanations see the studies of Dolan (2011), Samaritans (2012), Braun *et al* (2011) and Cleary *et al* (2012).

1.2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Pakistan is included in list of countries where suicide attempt prevails, and is on increase with passage of time (See Daily Times, 2015; Daily Ajj, 6th, June, 2015, Daily Mashriq, 14th March, 2014). Numerous factors lie behind the increase of incidents of suicide in Pakistan including domestic, psychological as well as cultural factors.

There are very limited research studies available on the issue of suicide in Pakistan. However, in light of the only few available studies and statistical information it is evident that the problem of suicide is growing and expanding in the country whereby National Poison Control

Centre, at Jinnah Post Graduate Medical Centre, in Karachi, HRCP's annual report for 2011, reported that there were 1,153 attempted suicides across Pakistan and 2,131 suicides in 2011 with five or six teenagers attempting suicide every day in Karachi. Of these, 60 per cent are teenage girls and families are reluctant to register the case as attempted suicide. Additionally, in 2002 World Health Organization estimated that over 15,000 suicides were committed in Pakistan, but Khan estimates it to be "probably about 5,000 to 7,000 suicides" annually. Further, there are approximately 50,000 to 150,000 cases of attempted suicides (Ebrahim, 2013).

The mentioned newspaper articles and statistics indicate that suicide prevails in Pakistan, and is on gradual increase with the passage of time. However, there is no hesitation in stating that suicide is one the understudied research areas in Pakistan specifically when it is compared with researches on suicide in Europe, America, Japan, India, China etc. In this connection, the current study is an effort to provide an insight to issue of suicide at regional level with specific reference to the role of masculinity in development of suicidal behavior.

1.3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study primarily aims to investigate into the role of masculinity in development of suicidality among men. Keeping in view the major objective the study has focused on the following aspects of the issue:

1. To explore the role of unemployment in damaging masculinity among men and its association with suicidality
2. To pin down the failure in role and responsibilities being a man and its association with suicidality

3. To know about the association of bodily expressions among men and suicidality

1.4. METHODOLOGY

Nature of the Study: This study is cross-sectional and is framed under qualitative research design e.g. the utilization of qualitative method of sampling, collection of information and analysis. The study specifically is based on thematic

Sampling: The study has utilized a qualitative method of sampling i.e. non-probability sampling whereby purposive sampling has been made in order to select samples from the population. In this regard, a total 20 male respondents were identified from hospital records in Batkhela, Chakdara and Timergara, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The specific criteria regarding selection of samples were:

- Individual having history of an attempted suicide
- Gender of the individual must be male

Tool for Data Collection: An interview guide was designed in light of the themes of the current study, and utilized for the collection of the information from the respondents.

Data Analysis: Detailed transcription and narratives have been made from the samples being interviewed. The transcription has been linked with literary information in order to extract findings.

1.5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Unemployment, Masculinity and Suicidality among Men

In terms of masculinity, employment is one of the basic causes of suicidality among men. Employment and nature of employment determines status of man in a given society. Studies indicate that in context of masculinity (hegemonic masculinity as well) employment along with nature of employment is an important aspect of a man's life (see Dolan, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity is associated with independence, self-sufficiency and with the role of 'provider' as men whereby employment and nature of employment play a key role in independence, self-sufficiency and being able to provide economic support to family. Unemployment and employment with low income do not allow men to be able to provide family with economic support, to be independent and self-sufficient (Braun *et al.*, 2011).

Unemployment makes men vulnerable to suicide in many ways. Research shows that unemployed men are at six-fold higher risk of developing chronic stress and depression as compare employed men (Friedman and Leon, 2007). Chronic stress and depression are significantly associated with suicide and related behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Lundin & Hemmingsson, 2009). Further, unemployment is one of the core causes of alcoholism and drug abuse among men. Alcoholism and drug abuse is listed in important indicators for development of suicide related behaviors (Cleary *et al.*, 2012). In addition to it, problems at work place are also linked with suicidality. Problems at work place leads to stress (often chronic stress) which further is associated with suicidal behavior (Evans *et al.*, 2012). Studies enumerates that work place is a source of social interaction and social bonds. Problems at work place disrupt social bonds and leads to stressful situations which is pre-request for suicidal behavior (Lundin & Hemmingsson, 2009; Moller-Leimkuhler, 2003). Apart, for men the concept of 'any job' is not sufficient rather they need good job in order to achieve

masculine expression. Men who are low skilled and are poorly educated are unable to make their identity which increases the risk of suicide among men (see Nixon, 2006). Field information indicate similar results to the literary information with regard to association between masculinity, unemployment and suicidal behavior. In this context, field information shows that unemployment is core to suicidality among men. Financial success is one of the basics that represent a man as masculine in the locality. Information obtained through interview shows that respondents R-B-20, R-A-27, R-Z-25, R-M-6 and R-G-24 attempted suicide due to financial problems and unemployment. Further, among these respondents R-Z-25 and R-G-24 argue that they feel ashamed because of not achieving financial success as compared to brothers and relatives. An extract from an interview is:

“Economic success has an extreme importance in our family and among relatives such as I cannot think about marriage until financial success. Besides, no one gives respect in our family if someone is jobless or don’t have any other means to earn money. Thus, disrespect and desire of getting married made me extremely tensed and I started tranquilizers to get relaxed. I can say that my comparative low economic position compelled me to abuse drug which made me suicidal....” (R-G-24).

A respondent told that:

“... I tried many jobs and businesses but I never settled economically. In our society people always talk about one’s job, property, bank balance etc. therefore, economic success is important to be respected in society. I was never able to get respect in this sense. I had tendency towards peers to get rid of tensions due to economic failures. I started abusing drugs with them and certain other anti-social activities. Family members and community started to

stigmatize me for shamelessness which led to stress and depression and it became so intense that I attempted suicide....”

Another respondent stated that:

“.... My parents taunted because I was unable to get financial success even I he hated me. On the other side my two brothers were successful financially and my father had maintained good relations with them. Further, on few occasions I was ignored in decision making in family and being a male member, I really got frustrated. Due to these issues, I spent most of time away from home and remained in companies who used drugs such marijuana. When I started use drug I found relaxation and satisfaction in it....” (R-B-24).

Role and responsibilities, Masculinity and Suicidality

Role attached with masculinity can be a driving force towards suicide among men. Studies shows that the role of mother in society is child rearing, care and household responsibilities (Appleby, 1991) whereas the role of ‘father’ is associated with responsibilities of protection and earning. Across the globe, men are expected to play the role of earner for family. Therefore, financial success is important for men to fulfil the role of being earner and the provider to the family. It is evident in European societies that men who fail to earn and to provide to family are highly vulnerable to stress, frustration and depression. Concomitantly, such men are vulnerable to develop suicidal behaviors as well (see for example Wong *et al.*, 2017). Role expectations and responsibilities are linked with socio-economic position. The expectations being a ‘father’ are high whereby men in case of not fulfilling there are tagged as non-masculine. This results in shame, stress and depression paving way for development of suicidal behaviors (Shows and Gerstel, 2009). In addition to, failure in fulfilling role and responsibilities of being earner and provider results in familial problems and even separation.

Familial problems and separation contributes to development of suicidal behaviors among men as well as women (see Khan, Naz, Khan and Ahmad, 2017; Fincham *et al.*, 2011). Field information with regard to role expectations and responsibilities shows resemblance to the mentioned literature. Field information revealed that role and responsibilities of being man are important while studying suicide and related behaviors. Respondents (e.g. R-Z-25 and R-A-15) argued that they were stigmatized and tagged as shameless for not being taking economic care of their families. R-A-15 stated that:

“...in our culture and society men who are jobless or fails to support their families are tagged as “na sarray” (a male with lack of qualities to be considered as man). I have been called na sarray many times by brothers due to the fact that I was never able to get financial success, and to support my wife, children and parents economically. Once, I had a fight with my brother he called me na sarray and abused me. I got so frustrated and shameful to end my and attempted suicide....”.

Another respondent asserted that:

“....I was unable to get good job. Family and community do not respect those with poor socio-economic status. Men are blamed when they are unable to provide economic support to their families. My father always tagged me as shameless because I was unable to support him like my brothers. With the passage of time it made me tensed and stressed and made me suicidal....”

Bodily Expressions, Masculinity and Suicidality among Men

Bodily expression is an important indicator for masculinity in most of societies. In this regard, first, physical body plays a vital role in social life as proved by social research (Crossley,

2006). Physical body plays a prime role in gender identity i.e. muscular body, dressing and walking style are symbols of hegemonic masculinity (Robertson, 2006). Second, a vital factor associated with bodily expression and masculinity is the concept of ‘damaged bodies’ (Connell, 2000). The practices of damaging body is associated with masculinity include primarily fighting and excessive use of drugs and alcohol. Additionally, toughness in males can also be considered as body damaging practice because it makes men to be not afraid of risk taking actions e.g. male visits doctor less than females which can damage their body (Dolan, 2011). Further, masculinity is associated with to seek physical problems through strength which makes men risky (Nixon, 2006). Alcohol and drug use is one of the major body damaging practices related to suicide (Boenisch *et al.*, 2010; Grittner *et al.*, 2012). Drinking style is another important component of bodily expressions. The style of drinking represents the level of manhood among many cultures and communities (Nayak, 2006). In a nutshell, bodily expression is important component of masculinity which further includes fighting, drug use, risk taking behaviors etc. The studies of Dolan (2011), Cleary (2012) and Samaritans (2012) explains that men who frequently fights, abuses drugs (alcohol, marijuana, opium etc.) and are involved in risk taking behaviors (e.g. wheeling, bullying, fast driving, keeping guns etc.) are at increased risk of developing suicidal behaviors. Relevantly, field information shows that men are show their manhood through fights, aggression, drug abuse and certain other risk taking behaviors. In this regard, many respondents argued that they considered themselves strong enough to attempt suicide in order to show their feelings to parents and family. Respondents stated that were involved in fights and showed their aggression to family in matters where their masculinity was challenged. A respondent during his interview argued that:

“I am strong and not fighting for my cause will be a sort of shame for me.

Thus, whenever I faced problems from my parents and siblings I fought....”

(R-D-29).

Another respondent stated that:

“... I am a man and a man should fight and not be afraid of anything...”

(R-U-31-M).

“... I am tough; charse (marijuana) can't damage my health. I had plenty of charse before attempting a suicide...” (R-B-20-M).

Field information also reflects that masculinity is associated with drug use whereas drug use is further associated with certain other problems. These problems include fighting and tension in family along with mental and psychological problems associated with drug use and abuse.

In this regard, an extract from an interview is:

“In my opinion I started drugs due to peers who considered themselves as masculine. Further, they always remained in some sort of issues with someone and I also got that habit”.

Moreover, in answer to another question, a respondent replied that:

“Of course, there were problems due to my drug addiction specifically when I drink alcohol. I had regular fights with family members. Whenever I was at home my family members remained tensed because of me” (R-B-20).

Regarding risk taking behaviors, a respondent stated that:

“... keeping pistol is important for boys in our family as it is linked with machismo. I had my own gun and shoot myself in the abdomen like a man....”

(R-K-22-M)

1.6. DISCUSSION

Masculinity is a broadly used term in social sciences (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity is a term which explains that how a given society is organized around the outlook of men with reference to different roles, expectations and occupations. In the mentioned context, men act according to their roles and expectations (see Walter, 2010). The conception of masculinity includes the collection of articulations, behaviors, roles, deeds, activities, expression and practices that are associated with male i.e. aggressiveness, strength, strong physique, fighting, drug use and providing economic support to family (see Connell, 2002). Findings of the current study in conjunction with literature indicate that masculinity is associated with suicidality among men. In this regard, economic success is an important factor which every man desire while on the other hand economic failure damages the masculinity (see Braun *et al* 2011 as well). Economic failure is a source of stress among men, and therefore in many cases it leads to suicidal behavior. Economic failure is also associated with drug use and abuse (e.g. the use of benzodiazepines, Marijuana, alcohol etc.) Drug use and abuse diverts mind into certain negative things such as fighting and familial tensions, and has its own connection suicidal behavior. These findings are in line with the studies of Samaritans (2012), Lundin & Hemmingsson (2009). Besides, men consider themselves as tough, and as a consequence they are involved in many damaging behaviors e.g. they smoke, drink and abuses other drugs; they fight; and, get highly aggressive in response to problems. These findings are similar to the findings of the studies conducted by Cleary *et al* (2012), Samaritans (2012) and Shows and Gerstel (2009).

While discussing masculinity in context of suicide, globally, economic aspects are linked with masculinity e.g. earning and job are particularly associated with men. In this regard, unemployment is a word which devastates each and every man around the world. Thus, unemployment is directly and indirectly associated with suicidality among men. In addition,

unemployment is particularly linked with hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to type of masculinity which is rated highest regard in a given social structure (Connell and Messerschmedt, 2005). It includes components like articulations, roles, deeds, behavior and activities attached with men in a given social structure. For instance, every man wants to be physically strong and have good job. Thus, hegemonic masculinity is the most valued type of masculinity in any culture (Samaritans, 2012). Hegemonic masculinity is associated with independence, self-sufficiency and with the role of 'provider' for men (Braun *et al.*, 2011). At this instant, unemployment is the aspect which does not allow a man to achieve such valuable level of masculinity (Dolan, 2011). Unemployment damages hegemonic masculinity and makes men vulnerable to suicide in many cases, for instance, men being dependent, failing in role of being provider and overall not achieving the sufficient level of hegemonic masculinity expose them to tension, depression, social isolation and drug use leading to suicide related behaviors (see Cleary *et al.*, 2012; Lundin & Hemmingsson, 2009 as well). Besides, not only unemployment rather nature of employment is also imperative to be considered, for example, according to Nixon (2006), for men the concept of 'any job' is not sufficient rather they need good job in order to achieve masculine expression. Men who are low skilled and are poorly educated are unable to make their identity that increases the risk of suicide among men. Unemployment and financial problems in relation to masculinity leads to drug use and abuse among men, for example, men start abusing drugs due to unemployment to get rid of tension and anxiety.

Bodily expression is an important indicator for masculinity in most of societies. In this regard, physical body plays a vital role in social life as proved by social research (Crossley, 2006). Physical body plays a prime role in gender identity such as muscular body, dressing and walking style are symbols of hegemonic masculinity (Robertson, 2006). A vital factor associated with bodily expression and masculinity is the concept of 'damaged bodies' (Connell, 2000). The concept of 'damaged bodies' can be explained through various indicators

including self-perception of toughness, aggressiveness, fighting as well as drug usage. These aspects are further correlated with increase in risk taking behaviors leading to damaging bodies. In addition, the mentioned indicators are in close association with suicidality (Dolan, 2011). The extracts in linkage with literature indicates that hegemonic masculinity is associated with bodily expressions including self-perception of toughness, aggressiveness, fighting as well as drug usage. Further, the respondents agreed that perception that they are tough and showing aggressiveness contributed to development of suicidal behaviors among them. These findings are in line with the studies of Robertson (2006), Samaritans (2012), Walter (2010) and Boenisch *et al* (2010).

1.7. CONCLUSION

The current research activity investigates into the role of masculinity in developing suicidal behaviors among men. The study has been conducted in District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study focused on the role of unemployment and failure in fulfilling role and responsibility in damaging masculinity and its link with suicidal behaviors among men. In addition to it, the study researched the role of bodily expressions among men and suicidality.

This study concludes that masculinity is one of the key factors in developing suicidal behaviors among men. Men who are unemployed, fail to get financial success and earns through non-respectable jobs are at increased risk of developing suicidal behaviors. Men are expected to take economic care of the family whereby male who are unable to provide economic support to their families are at increased risk of developing suicidal behaviors. Lastly, bodily expression plays a key role in developing suicidal behaviors among men. Men who are physically strong, abuses drugs, and men who fights to explore their machismo are at increased risk of developing suicidal behaviors.

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