

The Impact of Group and Individual Psychotherapy in a Self-Defence Program on Women's Well-Being

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Abstract Domestic violence within Uzbek families is a prevalent issue. This study explores the effects of individual and group psychological sessions, utilizing trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural and art therapy approaches, as part of a program supporting the psychological well-being of girls and women engaged in self-defence training. Qualitative data indicates that participants found both group and individual sessions to be effective. The study concludes with a discussion of limitation and implications for future research.

1 INTRODUCTION

"I'm afraid of him and his family too," a woman wrote to us after her husband nearly killed her in front of witnesses. Raised in a conservative family, she was taught that a woman must always obey, and her husband insists she has only duties, no rights. He keeps all her documents and money, leaving her with no resources. With five children and no supportive relatives, she feels trapped and helpless. She adds, "He humiliates and beats me. I fear for my life. Please help."

This woman's distressing situation was shared by the Independent Information Project Against Gender-

According to Irina Matvienko, the project organizer, when they started accepting anonymous stories in June 2019, they received 200 stories in the first month alone, and the flow of stories has not stopped. They continue to receive 3-8 stories per day, particularly from Russian speakers in Uzbekistan, who are a minority but have internet access.

Regrettably, domestic violence against women is largely overlooked in Uzbekistan. The untreated trauma inflicted on women endures throughout their lives and gets perpetuated across generations. The toll on individuals, families, and Uzbekistan as a whole is immeasurable.

Common gender norms in Uzbek families often negatively affect the development of young spouses' sense of responsibility. Men tend to prioritize their own needs over the emotional well-being of family members, especially their wives, viewing their role as one of dominance in family and marriage relations. On the other hand, women prioritize their husbands' needs and family issues over their own interests. They also believe the husband's role is one of dominance over the family (Hikmatullaeva, 2019).

As a psychologist involved in the "Self-Defence for Women and Girls" project, I have observed that most women hold the belief that marriage offers the best future for girls, even if it means relinquishing control over their own destinies. They are expected to stay at home, take care of children, and serve their husbands, as well as their in-laws. Critical decisions in young families are often made by the husband's parents, and the mother-in-law is often perceived as a source of stress and violence by the young wife.

Surveying young people, the majority agree that there is a problem of family abuse in society, with women and children being the primary victims of violence. Causes of violence within families include disobedience, low levels of education, cultural norms, unemployment, and strained spousal relationships (Latipova et al., 2020). A survey by the Republican Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (2021) indicated that the majority find physical violence by

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a husband against his wife unacceptable. However, it is concerning that 10.3% of respondents view violence as permissible in certain circumstances, such as when a woman provokes her husband.

The authoritarian family model is rooted in the cultural belief that children and wives should be subject to paternal authority. Many in Uzbekistan hold the opinion that a husband and father must sometimes resort to cruelty to maintain discipline. Emotional aspects of family and marital relationships, as well as the destabilizing effects of violence on families and individuals, are often not well understood by family members and local authorities. Reconciliation between spouses is prioritized over addressing the issue of violence (Latipova et al., 2020). Freedom of expression can foster understanding and mutual support, leading to greater satisfaction and stability in family and marital relationships (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014), a concept not always realized by spouses.

Girls and women would benefit greatly from understanding that domestic abuse causes trauma and has a profound impact on their behaviour and lives. They need to learn when to seek help and how to stand up for themselves.

2 METHODS

Pilot research was conducted as part of a program sponsored by an Alumni Outreach Grant from the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent: The Self-Defence Classes for Women and Girls. The program aims to equip women and girls with the skills and confidence to protect themselves and promote overall well-being. The physical self-defence training program is supplemented with mental health services to address past trauma, as well as the assistance of a lawyer and social worker.

The project was divided into four rounds, each lasting three months, from February 2021 to February 2022. The mental health round included weekly group sessions for ten weeks, along with 5-10 individual sessions for each participant who chose to see the psychologist. There were two participant groups: 13-18 years old and over 18 years old. For this study, feedback from the over-18 group was used. As participation in the psychological sessions was voluntary, the number of participants varied from round to round. A total of twenty-eight participants agreed to answer the questionnaire.

In the first round, group sessions focused on teaching and practicing self-help techniques.

Cognitive-behavioural approaches and mindfulness techniques were employed to help participants regulate intense emotions such as anger, anxiety, and guilt. Individual sessions aimed to foster cognitive processing for understanding past experiences and facilitating post-traumatic growth.

To address potential barriers to participating in the psychological aspect of the project, group sessions commenced with discussions about the stigma associated with mental health.

The treatment methodology was developed based on questions raised in the pilot sessions of the first round and on existing research about gender-based violence and PTSD treatment.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) challenges unhelpful ways of thinking that may result from trauma and is recommended by the American Psychological Association (APA) as an evidence-based intervention for PTSD.

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), developed by C. Neff, can improve emotional reactions and mental health outcomes for individuals who have experienced trauma.

Adult Attachment Theory (AAT) plays a role in the relationship between intimate partner violence and PTSD symptoms, and it can be utilized to treat attachment anxiety and dependency.

Art Therapy allows nonverbal aspects of trauma experiences to be expressed, providing emotional distance and a more objective perspective.

The purpose of this pilot study with women and girls in Uzbekistan was to examine the outcomes of the combination of CBT, self-compassion techniques, attachment style psychoeducation, and art therapy.

The research questions were as follows: 1) Does the program have any impact on participants? 2) If yes, what kind of impact?

Individual questionnaires were used to collect participants' feedback after each round, focusing on their expectations, how those expectations were met during group and individual sessions, the benefits they gained from the sessions, and their feelings during the sessions (e.g., feeling safe and understood).

For qualitative data analysis, the main researcher enlisted two psychologists familiar with the focus of the study, research questions, and the nature of the therapeutic techniques. They independently analysed the data and developed categories and a coding manual. The data was then linked to the different categories, and main themes were identified. The results were summarized and reviewed by other researchers.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative research analysis revealed the following categories: participant expectations, reported benefits from psychological sessions, and community impact.

Participant Expectations. The most commonly expressed expectations from participants included seeking help with anxiety, fear of leaving the home, coping with panic attacks resulting from violence at home, dealing with trauma from childhood abuse, a desire to be heard and supported, and the wish to improve themselves.

Reported Benefits from Psychological Sessions. Participants reported several positive outcomes from the mental health part of the program, such as being able to identify violent behaviour, managing anxiety, practicing self-reflection, experiencing self-acceptance and self-compassion, feeling empowered to improve self-care, and using acquired CBT techniques.

Identifying Violence. Some participants initially had difficulty recognizing violent behaviours. However, group sessions discussing various types of violence helped them understand its impact on their lives and personalities and how to protect themselves.

Self-reflection. Participants found that mental health services helped them sort out their feelings and view problems and life from different angles, resulting in more positive perspectives.

Self-Acceptance. Participants reported accepting their vulnerability and learning to embrace and be compassionate towards their weaknesses.

Self-compassion. Participants experienced a shift from self-criticism to self-compassion, allowing them to comfort themselves and begin healing from trauma.

Managing Anxiety. Participants reported improved anxiety management, reduced hyper-arousal, and decreased avoidance of difficult situations.

Empowerment. Participants felt more resourceful, confident in their ability to cope with difficulties, and more in control of their lives.

Self-protection Skills. Some participants felt more empowered to stand up for themselves, particularly against domestic violence.

Relationship Improvement. Improved communication and personal boundaries resulted in better quality relationships for some participants.

Self-care. Participants reported utilizing the skills learned during the sessions to take better care of their mental health.

The findings indicate that the program had a positive impact on participants, helping them develop coping strategies, increase self-awareness, and foster a compassionate and empowered attitude towards themselves and their relationships.

"Taking care of oneself is another valuable insight that I gained from this project. Each day, I make an effort to prioritize my physical well-being, emotional state, and overall health. When I feel stressed, I use the Safe Place technique, which our psychologist taught us, and it has been immensely helpful. I have also incorporated meditation, dance therapy, art therapy, and skincare routines for my face and body to uplift my spirits and relax."

"I have learned to stop bringing work home every day and to avoid overworking and exhausting myself. While I still approach my tasks with the same diligence and responsibility, I now assess my own limits more wisely."

Acquiring CBT Techniques. Some participants shared in their feedback how they utilized the techniques they learned to manage challenging situations in their lives.

"I have learned how to analyse my thoughts since they greatly influence our emotions. Our assumptions can be harmful, so I now manage my thoughts to avoid misconceptions about reality. Keeping a record of my thoughts in a table format, as we were taught, will help me work on changing destructive thought patterns."

"At the beginning, I was overwhelmed by a whirlwind of uncontrollable thoughts, and I struggled to cope. Although I won't claim that everything magically improved, I do feel more at ease than before."

Facing Trauma and Difficult Situations. Another reported outcome of the training was the ability to face trauma and seek post-traumatic growth.

"I have learned to approach painful topics carefully and safely, cope with feelings of guilt, and develop a greater sense of self-worth."

"The gentle and safe assistance in healing trauma associated with violence has been most helpful."

"I may have made subtle changes, nothing extraordinary, but any progress is a victory in my eyes. I understand that fixing things will take time, but the individual sessions have made a significant difference in my progress."

Community Impact. Participants described how the training influenced their relationships and how they shared their newfound knowledge with friends, colleagues, and relatives.

"I have been sharing the techniques I learned with my friends. For instance, we practice mindful walking

together and then share our impressions and feelings with each other."

"I explained to my younger sister about the nature of violence and preventive measures against bullying, cyberbullying, and online exploitation."

"After our session, I started expressing my needs and feelings not just to my friends but also to my dad, which encouraged my mom to join in and express her feelings and frustrations as well as communicate her needs."

As this program aims to introduce girls and women to the availability and importance of psychological help, it is encouraging that most participants continued their journey in self-help by utilizing available resources. For example, one participant is working on addressing emotional violence from her partner and overcoming depression following the death of her father. During her participation, she found a good job that allowed her to seek additional professional help to heal her deep wounds from complex PTSD.

4 CONCLUSION

To safeguard girls and women from the prevalent acceptance of family abuse in Uzbekistan as normal, it is essential to educate females about the consequences of violence and empower them to put an end to it, thereby breaking the cycle in their own families.

The demand for teaching women to combat domestic violence is widespread, as women are eager to acquire skills for self-care and self-management. The findings from our pilot study demonstrate that the Self-Defence Classes for Girls and Women project, especially the psychological aspect, has played a significant role in addressing trauma, fostering post-traumatic growth, and empowering women.

The results suggest considering Schema Therapy for future use, as it incorporates most components of this mental health service program, including CBT, MSC, and attachment theory. Implementing it in group sessions could lead to deeper unpacking and healing of trauma.

To enhance the success and well-being of Uzbekistanis, several steps can be taken:

1. Conduct a public campaign to raise awareness that physical punishment and humiliation are harmful to families and the nation.

2. Provide treatment for abused children to overcome their trauma and break the cycle of abuse in the next generation.

3. Enhance the availability of parent education to replace abusive authoritarian practices with more effective child-rearing skills.

4. Promote the accessibility of government-initiated programs designed to protect women, such as the laws safeguarding women from harassment and abuse (2019) and guaranteeing children's rights (2007). Women should be informed about their ability to obtain protection orders and find shelter, psychological support, and legal services at crisis centres. Currently, few women and girls are aware of these programs.

By addressing the traumas of domestic violence and replacing abusive family patterns with nurturing and effective parenting skills, Uzbekistani families, individuals, and the nation as a whole will benefit. Unlocking the full potential of women, rather than suppressing it, is Uzbekistan's greatest resource.

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