

# EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN WOMEN AND GIRLS MEDIATED BY PATRIARCHAL UPBRINGING AND ITS IMPACT ON SEXISM AND MENTAL HEALTH: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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## SUMMARY

*Sexism is a type of structural discrimination that can manifest as the subjugation of woman in familial and social roles. Gender-based violence often occurs in societies where patriarchal norms exist. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) includes physical, sexual and psychological/emotional abuse directed towards females. Emotional violence against women and girls is usually underestimated, if not overlooked. Patriarchal upbringing can predominantly result in the emotional abuse of female children. This narrative review will discuss the impact emotional abuse in women and girls mediated by patriarchal upbringing has on sexism and mental health. This paper will also explore how gendered upbringing can contribute to the normalization of VAWG and the victim-blaming of females.*

**Key words:** emotional abuse - patriarchal upbringing - mental health - hostile sexism - benevolent sexism

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## INTRODUCTION

### The culture of victim-blaming women

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) includes physical, sexual and psychological/emotional abuse of females. Emotional violence against women and girls is by and large underestimated, if not always overlooked. The underestimation of emotional violence against women and girls in patriarchal societies is, in part, due to victims of this type of abuse being considered reprehensible (Boonzaier & De la Rey 2004). Victim-blaming is the transference of blame from the perpetrator to the victim for the offense committed by the former against the latter (Ryan 1971). The reasons for victim-blaming women are multitudinous. Women are frequently blamed for virtually anything that is convenient for the person, likely a male, doing the blaming (Taylor 2020). Taylor (2020) theorizes the main reason for underestimating women's abuse, including emotional, is the normalization of victim-blaming women. Accountability and culpability are directed towards female survivors and their characteristics and behaviours (i.e., *'Why is she crying?! She shouldn't have been dressed like that. It's her fault for attracting that kind of attention. She was asking for it.'*) (DeKeseredy 2021; Gover et al. 2018). Allocating blame for men's offences and transgressions on women places a huge emotional toll and burden on the latter, who often struggle throughout life

as they are expected, even forced, to conform with societal and traditional norms. Nevertheless, patriarchal societies condition people to focus on the exoneration of male perpetrators (i.e., through justifying or defending male offenses) by pivoting women as the cause of and the solution to *all* male violence, instead of focusing on the male committing the offence(s) against women (Taylor 2020).

Unfortunately, broader society and huge segments of the media perpetuate and exacerbate victim-blaming women, even in sensitive cases where vulnerable women are subjected to a torrent of abuse that is blatantly having egregious effects on them to the extent that they can become suicidal (Smith 2020). For example, sexualised behaviours in men, even those that transgress moral and legal boundaries i.e., debauchery, sexual harassment, and rape, are considered justifiable by some camps. Arguments have been made, often vociferous, that a man has an insatiable sexual appetite and that it is in a man's 'nature' to have a proclivity for promiscuity (Taylor 2020). Such deeply entrenched beliefs can profoundly distort perceptions of gender equality. The act of blaming women, being widely applied and normalized in gendered parental nurturing style (i.e., patriarchal upbringing), represents biased traditions that are commonly based on hatred against women and girls and that are manifested in unequal and unfair treatment between genders (Taylor 2020).

## GENDER STEREOTYPICAL UPBRINGING

The normalization of women as property that belongs to men primarily originates from parental nurturing style. Normalization of gender roles is linked to perception of gender-stereotypes. Emotional gender stereotypes are broad societal expectations of the roles that women and men should play (Brody & Hall 2000). Accordingly, prescriptive norms, which are socially acceptable emotional reactions for men and women, enforce stereotypical beliefs (i.e., men don't cry, women should be passive and modest) (Heilman 2001). These norms are derived from caring behaviours modelled by parents who apply traditional gender beliefs and stereotypes on their children during their early upbringing (Mastari et al. 2019). During childhood, gender prejudice is commonly seen in the types of gifts parents give to their children. For instance, the upbringing of females is characterized by parents giving their daughters gifts considered 'feminine' such as dolls and kitchen toys. Conversely, the upbringing of males is characterized by parents giving their sons gifts considered 'masculine' such as racing cars and aeroplanes (Eccles et al. 2000). These nuanced gender-stereotypical practices carry overtones and traditional and cultural meanings that enforce defining separate gender expectations.

Parent's cultural beliefs are constituted of traditional gender beliefs and moral beliefs (Mastari et al. 2019). Gender traditional stereotypes illustrate a gender-specific cultural role and expectation that influence on people's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs (Eckes & Trautner 2012). Parent's traditional gender beliefs are aligned with gender essentialism (Inglehart 2000), which is mainly concerned with role expectation towards men and women. Gender roles disproportionately affect women because gender interdependency is directed more towards females (Inglehart 2000). Conversely, parents' moral beliefs are shown to have primacy over traditional beliefs on children's sexist attitudes (Mastari et al. 2019). The impact of parents' morals is evidenced in children's life decisions and personal matters, such as, but not limited to, virginity and sexual promiscuity, marriage and divorce, pregnancy and abortion, and relationships and sexual orientation (Meeusen & Boonen 2017). Patriarchal culture, therefore, influences the morality of parents which can be strongly linked to emotionally abusive experiences in violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Emotions are also stereotyped according to gender that starts in early childhood. Female stereotypical emotions include sadness, fear, shame, and guilt which are categorized as powerless emotions. These emotions express a certain amount of social vulnerability. Male stereotypical emotions include anger, pride, and con-

tempt which are categorized as powerful emotions. These emotions express a certain amount of social dominance (Timmers et al. 2003, Zammuner 2000). Hence, perception of powerless and powerful stereotyping pedestalizes men for ability and demotes women for vulnerability. Moreover, women who self-promote are more likely to receive social reprisals for violating female modesty in gender prescriptive norms (Rudman 1998).

The premise that parents ground their nurturing style upon is that women should live modestly, behave accordingly, and make choices that can keep them safe from the ubiquity of male hostility. Emotional abuse can, thereafter, be the result of the control imposed by parents on children to ensure they conform with patriarchal norms. Patriarchal parental nurture is clearly observed in the disparity in attitudes towards sexual experiences, such as openness and liberty, and virginity and promiscuity between genders (Carpenter 2002). Chastity taboo still only applies to women. The infiltration of emotional abuse is evident in the hypocrisy in relation to sexual behaviours between genders. Women's virginity is still perceived as sacrosanct. A woman can only be monogamous and have sexual congress to consummate a marriage; otherwise, her behaviour is considered licentious. Whereas a man can be polygamous and have frequent sexual intercourse to his libido's content and remain above reproach (Carpenter 2002). A woman who is open to sexual experiences will more likely be stigmatized and shamed i.e., 'She is a *slut*', whereas a man who is open to sexual experiences is masculinized and memorialized i.e., 'He is a stud' (Taylor 2020). Moreover, pre-marital sex is reprehensible in women but not in men in patriarchal societies. It is *fait accompli* that a woman's honour is inextricably bound to her virginity. The honour of a woman is disgraced when women engage in pre-marital sex; therefore, a woman's honour is/should be preserved by controlling the sexual behaviour of women in patriarchal societies.

Doyle (1998) found that emotional abuse does not prevail in specific families but can be seen more broadly in families who face multiple stressors and contexts. Research, thereafter, found significant evidence on the impact of parental control attitudes on children's behaviour problems (Neece et al. 2012, Han & Lee 2018). Interestingly, Endendijk et al. (2016) unveiled that gender-specific child rearing (i.e., differential parenting of boys and girls) is a common manifestation of parental control. A salient finding of this study was that gender-differentiated control was perpetrated by gender-stereotyped parents i.e., patriarchal parental styles.

Gender-inferiority and control over females in the context of familial norms has been present since antiquity. Back then, due to the perceived superiority of masculinity, the father was granted the authority to

make decisions about the fate of neonates. For example, female neonates and neonates with defects, deficiencies and disabilities were perceived as burdensome and therefore expendable (the father was granted the right to decide the fate of such neonate cases) (Harrower & McIlveen 1998). Moreover, chastisement was a method of discipline administered by the father on children to cast the devil out of them or to punish recalcitrant women who do not conform with the norms and traditions of the time (Harrower & McIlveen 1998).

In a patriarchal society, the oppression of females continues to exist, such as emotional exploitation of women (KAFA 2010). The intergenerational transmission of the objectification of women normalizes the emotional exploitation and abuse of women and girls (i.e., a girl is initially considered property of her father and, following her betrothal, her husband assumes ownership). For instance, oppression in women manifests in various contexts during her nurture, such as not having the freedom to make her own decisions. To illustrate the leaps and bounds women have made to gain autonomy in society, it was only until after the mid-1970s that women were allowed to apply for credit cards holding their names (up until then, they needed a male co-signer (husband or father) for a card to be issued in the *male's* name); another example is that it was only until after early twentieth century that women were no longer prohibited from smoking cigarettes in public (Zeisler 2016). Suffice to say that paternal oppression over daughters normalizes the objectification of women, which is later effectuated by the husband over their wives (Usta et al. 2016).

Women are being socialised to accept subjugation from men and to accept the patriarchal society, which contemporaneously reinforces gender inequality (Usta et al. 2016). Furthermore, males are being taught that they are responsible for their sister's honour and are being raised and socialised in such a way that gives them authority and superiority over their sisters. Thus, they grow up with a male superiority complex mindset that influences their behaviours towards women (i.e., their wives should they get married and their female children should they become fathers) (Usta et al. 2016). The study by Usta et al. (2016) also explains that in Lebanon, a society that continues to apply patriarchal norms, extreme role-gendering is being practiced by parents whereby males are taught that manhood (i.e., being tough, masculine, and powerful) is praiseworthy; whereas females are taught that 'being a daughter of honour' (i.e., completing house chores and obediently following her father, brothers, and husband) is praiseworthy. This reinforces the notion that females will more likely become housewives and subserviently serve males (Usta et al. 2016). Subsequently, household work and childcare are still not equally perceived between genders to the extent that it

is entirely the women's responsibility and men have no domestic role(s) to play whatsoever (The World Bank [TWB] 2011; European Commission [EU] 2007). Such gendered social and cultural stressors and contexts evidently affect females more than they affect males (Usta et al. 2016; KAFA 2010).

### **Religiosity and conservatism**

The emotional abuse of women is frequently seen in religions throughout the world albeit to varying degrees. Religious regulations and restrictions resulting in coercive and oppressive practices apply mostly, if not only, to females (Zuhur 2003). For example, restrictions are evident in some religious courts that afford the husband complete authority over his wife. These restrictions leave women powerless, oppressed, and denied the autonomy to make decisions. Another example is women's modesty defined by a demure dress coding. For instance, Yamani (1996), a researcher on women in Islam, explains the centrality of the *Hijab* (veil) in the Islamic movement and that the advantages of the *Hijab* can extend into the social and economic aspects of Muslims' lives. Whilst, according to some, Islamic religion instructs that only females must wear the *Hijab*, other authorities also point out that Islam instructs both women and men to wear modestly and to lower their gaze in presence of the members of opposite sex who are not their relative.

On top of gender-based discrimination within religious norms, emotional abuse is apparent when parents coerce their female children into wearing the *Hijab* against their will (Roald 2003). The advent of social media has provided a platform to raise awareness of oppressive gender-based so-called religious practices. Indeed, women felt empowered and emboldened to share their experiences of wearing the hijab against their will and their determination to emancipate themselves from this practice. They were able to inspire global solidarity, and the hashtag #FreeFromHijab trended on Twitter.

Each country has their own unique culture and laws. In Lebanon, the value of a woman is undermined, especially in a court setting where child custody laws are in favour of men. Each religious court (which is often presided by a male judge) has its own set of laws whereby the application of patriarchal views is being protected, justified, and legitimized within religious texts (KAFA 2010). Herein, the lack of parental support, the burden to be obedient, and the expectation that a woman must accept her fate have a huge emotional impact on women's life (Usta et al. 2016). Conversely, countries that have laws that protect women's rights i.e., UK legislation, give women more power and platforms to speak-up against patriarchal injustices. Restraining and protection orders are easier to gain in countries like

UK than in countries like Lebanon; this promotes a healthier climate for childhood treatment (especially females) and a safer environment for women (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 2021; Gov.UK 2020).

## EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Human emotions can be so overwhelming that they can preclude people from perceiving events (Niedenthal & Ric 2017). The two-factor theory of emotions that was developed by Schachter and Singer (1962) studies the diversity in people's emotional reaction to the same event. For example, in people who attend the same event, some may experience happiness and joy whereas others may experience fear and apprehension (Niedenthal & Ric 2017). However, Niedenthal & Ric (2017) revealed in their study that emotions, whether this is expressing or suppressing, are being managed by cultural values and norms. This management of emotions is a key factor in gendered emotional abuse when it comes to patriarchal upbringing. Women being more subjected to comply to patriarchal norms, they are more of a target to conform to social and traditional expectations which in return enforce the application of patriarchy in nurture. Hereafter, a biased perception may arise between genders, undermining thereafter gender equality (Glick et al. 2000).

In an experimental study conducted by Cahill et al. (1994), unusual and unexpected consequential events were suggested to enhance memories for childhood experiences, including, unfortunately, childhood trauma (Brewin et al. 1993). Intuitively, a child who experiences violence is highly prone to become a victim and/or to repeat it in adulthood; however, not all victims of abuse become perpetrators (Donnellan et al. 2005; Young et al. 2011). Some victims may successfully cope or heal wounds from their traumas; others try to conceal and/or avoid abuse. Many victims remain targets of abuse, the consequences of which often manifest as emotional dysregulation (Temple et al. 2013; Harsha et al. 2020). Thus, trauma of emotional abuse can be linked to interpersonal problems (Ha et al. 2019; Neigh et al. 2009). For instance, a trauma informed approach may normalize emotional abuse in females (Taylor 2020). Women accept the trauma caused by continuous emotional abuse through normalizing these experiences (Taylor 2020).

## MISOGYNY LINKED TO STEREOTYPING EMOTIONS

*Misogyny* is a word of Greek etymology that means the hatred (*misos*) of women (*gune*). Misogyny resembles racism in the sense that people *think* that their attitudes towards social injustice are evolving with time; however, the roots of discrimination remain the same

(i.e., there is now plenty of 'woke' rhetoric, yet this is not reflected in reality #BlackLivesMatter #MeToo) (Banet-Weiser 2018; Taylor 2020). Misogyny is employed in society in many direct and indirect ways. Direct misogyny is characterized by the promulgation of blatantly gender-stereotypical messages and policies against womanhood, whereas indirect misogyny is characterized by the shrouding of overt sexism by a veil of seemingly benign and innocuous messages and policies which, on the surface appear to be applied for women's sake (Taylor 2020).

Misogyny is not exclusively perpetrated by males but in fact it became subsumed under a larger cultural discourse in which women are, unfortunately, also active participants (Bloch 1989). When a community is raised against a backdrop of patriarchy, emotional abuse against women and girls becomes normalized and regards women who do not conform with the status quo (i.e., those who 'emancipate' themselves from the shackles of misogyny) as recalcitrant. For instance, second-wave feminists consider misogyny to be both, the cause and the result, of patriarchal control. The "Madonna-Whore Complex" is a second-wave feminists understanding of women whereby women are perceived as either mothers or *whores*. This dichotomous perception was related to "Virgin-Whore Complex" for defining women exclusively upon their sexual and reproductive life (Taylor 2020). Parents or primary caregivers play a major role in this context in helping women and girls overcome social pressures. They do this by improving perceptions on gender equality and on women's worth, both of which can result in building women's self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy.

In addition, although ideologies of gender sexism (Inglehart et al. 2003; Napier et al. 2010) and gender inequality (Inglehart et al. 2003) are less likely to be supported by high levels of education, wealth, and societal health. Those ideologies, however, were found to be aligned with gender-based decisions i.e., females in politics receiving less votes compared to their male counterparts (Swim et al. 1995), and women receiving less support to pursue vocations considered to be traditionally male (i.e., engineering). Moreover, these ideologies disempower women who attempt to promote policies that limit male dominance (Sibley & Perry 2010).

## PERCEPTIONS OF SEXISM

Perception, as defined by Schiffman and Kanuk (2013), is the *process by which an individual selects, organizes, and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world*. Perceptions of sexism comprise two attitudes: benevolent and hostile sexism. Both attitudes mutually and synergistically reinforce ideologies and complement the subordination of wo-

men albeit in two different ways (Cross & Overall 2018, Glick & Hilt 2000, Hammond et al. 2018). Subordination of women and antipathy against female gender overtly manifest through hostile sexism; whereas benevolent sexism manifests in a subtle way that provides a positive tone for women and girls to make it seem more palatable (Barreto & Ellemers 2005; Mastari et al. 2019).

Hostile sexism can be seen in three different models. The first model is “Dominative Paternalism” whereby patriarchal dominance is overly stated through gender control (i.e., *‘The world would be a better place if women supported men more and criticized them less’*). The second model is the “Competitive Gender Differentiation” whereby women are discouraged from being more ambitious than men (e.g., *‘A wife should not be significantly more successful in her career than her husband’*). The third and last model in hostile sexism is “Heterosexual Hostility”; this model promotes sexual objectification of women for masculine pleasure and encompasses women’s concerns regarding their wishes to accept or refuse sexual overtures from men (e.g., *‘Women get a kick by teasing men and making it seem they are sexually available but then they act surprised and victimize themselves when men reciprocate their flirtations’*) (Glick & Fiske 1996).

In parallel, three models of benevolent sexism have also been identified. The first model is “Protective Paternalism” which clearly explicates women’s need to be protected by men (i.e., *‘Women should be cherished and protected by men’*). The second model is “Complementary Gender Differentiation” which encompasses female qualities, including domestic, that predominantly exists in women and seldom in men (i.e., *‘Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess’*). The third model is ‘Heterosexual Intimacy’ which outlines how men’s romantic needs are fulfilled by women (e.g., *‘Men are never truly happy in life without being romantically involved with women’*) (Glick & Fiske 1996).

## **DISTORTION IN PERCEPTIONS OF SEXISM**

Higgins and Bargh’s (1987) theory on perception highlights that people want to “seek the truth” of events, however, other motivational factors, including maintaining the integrity of self-esteem, are prioritized and can therefore obscure the truth. Nonetheless, emotional abuse in female victims may result from the internalization of public victim-blaming i.e., self-blaming (Taylor 2020). The perception around female victim-blaming permeates and pervades the mindsets of people consciously and/or unconsciously. Subsequently, allocating blame on women leads to the lowering of their self-esteem which is a risk for developing low mood,

anxiety, anger, hostility, and other psychological and behavioural problems (Yun et al. 2019).

Communication serves as an important pathway to one’s perception. Interestingly, the way parents communicate (verbal and non-verbal) with their children (i.e., language, tone, and gestures that parents use as part of their nurturing style) shapes a child’s character, affects parent-child connectedness, and impacts a child’s behaviours and emotional health, all of which, in turn, influence a child’s perceptions about events (Ackard et al. 2006). For instance, use of verbally abusive language can have short- and long-term emotional sequelae (Ramos et al. 2020). Patriarchal parental style is characterized by gender-discriminating language that incriminates females for causing societal ills (Taylor 2020). For example, women and girls are considered entirely responsible for compromising their own safety and security (Shaver & Drown 1986; Taylor 2020). Taking for instance the recent case of Sarah Everard, a 33-year old marketing executive who was murdered on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2021 in London, England, by a male police officer. Sexist perceptions related to this heinous and horrific incident are evidenced by how Sarah was victim-blamed for her homicide. People, irrespective of gender, faulted Sarah for walking by the park during darkness (Pantony, 2021). Sexist perceptions are cultivated from a young age from the gender-discriminating messages that parents inculcate into their children’s minds i.e., *‘girls should come back home before dark for their own safety’*. The emphasis is seldom, if ever, on rearing males not to be violent towards females. Pertinently, following Sarah’s disappearance, police officers, who are responsible for promoting safety and security and for deterring crime reportedly told women not to go out alone rather than instructing men not to commit violent offenses (Pantony 2021). This, in and of itself, illustrates the chronicity of emotional abuse, gaslighting, and violence perpetrated against women and girls.

## **THE LINK BETWEEN PARENTAL EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND DEVIANT BEHAVIOURS IN CHILDREN**

Serial killing is an extreme type of deviant behaviour. The link between parental emotional abuse and serial killing is not, in our opinion, being investigated with the attention, focus and resources that it demands. Rosemary West (Wade 2020), Jane Toppan (New England Society 2020), Nannie Doss (Belmonte 2018, Ramsland 2019) are some examples of notorious female serial killers who were victims of parental emotional abuse. Moreover, these cases illustrate how parental emotional abuse may be a contributory factor to homicidal behaviours i.e., serial killing. Further examples include the cases of Ted Bundy and Ed

Kemper. Bundy and Kemper reportedly exhibited psychopathic tendencies such as a lack of empathy towards their victims. These male serial killers had disclosed that they were victims of parental emotional abuse which reportedly was one of the main motives driving their heinous crimes. Although these examples may be anecdotal, they, nonetheless, yield important and terrifying insights into the devastating and destructive consequences that parental emotional abuse has on victims. This begs the questions, ‘What is the relationship – if any - between parental emotional abuse and lack of empathy, and can this result in serial killing?’ Hence, future studies should explore these research questions further.

## CONCLUSION

In this narrative review we have highlighted the emotional abuse of women and girls mediated by patriarchal upbringing. Emotional abuse is often the result of parents imposing control over their children, particularly their daughters, to conform with patriarchal norms. Adoption of patriarchal norms promotes the gendered upbringing of children which can result in a distortion in the perceptions of sexism. Normalization of VAWG is enforced by the culture of victim-blaming women which is imposed by patriarchal societies. VAWG and patriarchal upbringing can have profoundly adverse effects on the mental health of victims. Public awareness and advocacy are ways that we can collectively combat VAWG, promote gender equality and improve mental health outcomes.

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### Contribution of individual authors:

Melissa Abi Rached conducted the literature review and wrote the entire paper.

Ahmed Hankir co-wrote the entire paper and revised the manuscript.

Rashid Zaman was the senior supervisor and carried out further revision.

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