



EXPLORING GASLIGHTING, AMONG MALES: STIGMA, AND THE SILENCE AROUND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Sofia Sattar

sofiasattar612@gmail.com

MS Clinical Psychology Student, Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Sidra Noreen

sidranoreen@gcwuf.edu.pk

Teaching Assistant, Government College Women University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Ms. Raumish Masud Khan

raumishmasud.fsd@superior.edu.pk

Senior Lecturer, Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the stigma and silence surrounding male victimisation and male experiences of gaslighting as a form of psychological abuse in intimate partner relationships. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from semistructured interviews with men who experienced psychological and emotional abuse. The findings of the study show that gaslighting involved emotional invalidation, selective use of memory, and intentional manipulation, which culminated in self-doubt, self-blame, and psychological distress. The study reveals that stigma, self-imposed masculine norms, and the fear of being disbelieved, which results in social isolation, also results in limited help-seeking and the disclosure of abuse. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, some participants displayed increased awareness, even of the manipulation, and started to set some of their own limits. The study, therefore, reinforces the importance of acknowledging male experiences of psychological IPV and the urgent need to address the issue of psychological IPV against men and develop support services that are inclusive of all genders.

Keywords: *Male Victimization, Gaslighting, Psychological Intimate Partner, Violence, Stigma, Help-Seeking, Qualitative Research.*

Corresponding Author: Sofia Sattar (Student of MS Clinical Psychology, Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University Lahore, Pakistan).
Email: sofiasattar612@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of gaslighting refers to a sustained covert psychological attempt to manipulate a victim to the point of them doubting their own memory and reality (Sweet, 2019). Gaslighting is psychological abuse, and involves denial of events, emotional trivialization, and blame shifting to erode self-trust and self-identity. In the past, most research focused on the victimization of women; more recent studies, however, acknowledge gaslighting as a gender-neutral phenomenon, inflicting significant psychological trauma on all genders (Adair, 2025). This research trend, however, lacks focus on male victimization, particularly in the context of the Global South and in patriarchal societies.

The theory of Coercive Control (Stark, 2007) depicts gaslighting within a broader system of domination. Here, gaslighting is viewed as a psychological tool that creates a shift in the victim's internal reality, making them dependent and compliant, all without the need for physical violence (Taylor et al., 2022). Especially in intimate relationships, the subtle, slow, and imperceptible attributes of gaslighting make it difficult to detect and resist.

Victims who are male encounter particular obstacles as a result of the social constructs of masculinity, which associate emotional strength with stoicism, authority, self-control, and dominance. Research suggests that men who admit to suffering from psychological abuse are dismissed, mocked, or have their concerns trivialized by those in their social circle and by formal institutions, which further entrenches silence and prolongs the victimization (Macassa et al., 2025). Such patterns of victimization and a lack of supportive responses from their social networks leads men to incorrectly self-blame, and to question the very validity of their pain (Carmo et al., 2011).

Even within Pakistan's patriarchal power structures, these factors of culture, particularly those pertaining to male honor (ghairat), dignity (izzat), and endurance (bardasht) which promote emotional stoicism for men, are especially salient (Zakar et al., 2013). The psychological abuse of spouses, having been normalized as a mere marital dispute, and as a shameful of an act for men to seek out assistance, gaslighting, which is relational and often imperceptible, remains unrecognized, even in the intimacy of familial or professional relationships (Morgan & Wells, 2016).

The mechanisms that explain gaslighting include cognitive dissonance, intermittent reinforcement, projection, and an internalized acceptance of abuse. These mechanisms systematically erode one's self-concept and autonomy, causing anxiety, depression, identity diffusion, emotional numbness, and trauma responses (Shuler, 2010).

For men, the combination of victimization and masculine identity creates an internal conflict that heightens the distress and postpones help-seeking. Evidence also shows that the denial or institutional dismissal of abuse increases the risk of suicidal ideation among male victims (Kim et al., 2022).

The institutional responses to intimate partner violence still tend to focus primarily on women. This is warranted, but a focus on male psychological victimization has created structural gaps. In Pakistan, the lack of gender-responsive laws and an absence of mental health services aggravate the psychological toll of systemic invalidation, disincentivizing help-seeking and sustaining victimization in both interpersonal and systemic forms (Saboor et al., 2025). Such conditions may constitute a form of secondary gaslighting, where victims experience denial not only from their abusers, but also from the systems that are supposed to provide support (Landa-Blanco & Mejía Sánchez 2025).

The most recent studies emphasize the need for gender-sensitive frameworks for the study of psychological abuse in the context of IPV as a relational dynamic of a system of power and control (Maqsood & Younas 2024; Taylor et al., 2022). The feminists' reframing, attachment, and social learning approaches converge to explain the abuse and the silencing of male victimhood as a function of the patriarchy (Gierisch et al., 2014).

Research on male gaslighting in Pakistan is very limited, and there is a pressing need to analyze these experiences in the contextual specificities of the sociocultural frameworks within which they occur. This is crucial to building IPV scholarship on the margins, decreasing stigma, and shaping strategies to address the psychological dimension of abuse as a concern of humanity rather than a gendered concern.

This study attempts to understand the extent of gaslighting as a form of psychological abuse within a patriarchal context of Pakistani society. More specifically, it attempts to understand the process of emotional manipulation and the control of Pakistani men as a form of coercive control within patriarchal societies.

1.1. The specific objectives of this study include the following

- To analyze the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of gaslighting of male victims within Pakistani patriarchal intimate relationships.
- To examine the role of patriarchal constructions and socio-culturally defined relationships of men in terms of the recognition, disclosure, and coping of psychological abuse in men.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of gaslighting and emotional abuse among Pakistani men and used methodologies such as thematic analysis and in-depth interviews. Research credibility and participant safety were enhanced through the ethical considerations of confidentiality, consent, and referral pathways.

2.1. Research Design

Thematic analysis offered rigor and accurate interpretation of the participant experiences, while semi-structured interviews facilitated the collection of comprehensive experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Population and Setting: Research participants were adult males (≥ 18 years), currently or recently married, and from married diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds from rural (Faisalabad, Sargodha, Jhang, Stayana) and urban districts (Hodgson et al., 2019).

2.2. Sampling and Sample Size

Multi-stage purposive and convenience sampling; 6–8 interviews were conducted for the purpose of breaking thematic saturation (Creswell, 2013)

2.3. Data Collection

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face and online, along with consent audio recording, or by taking detailed notes. Interviewers trained in IPV trauma-informed methods (WHO, 2016) conducted the interviews.

2.4. Translation and Cultural Adaptation

To ensure clarity and cultural relevance guides were translated into Urdu. A culturally adapted guide was used (Beaton et al., 2000) and forward-back translations were used to confirm accuracy of the guide.

2.5. Data Analysis

Credibility and triangulation of audit trails were used to substantiate the transcribed analysis of themes using each of the steps in Braun & Clarke (2006).

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured. All procedures remained within WHO guidelines (Watts et al., 2001) regarding confidentiality, informed consent, participant safety, and referral pathways.

3.Result and Discussion

The Discussion section below presents the main themes that were identified from the thematic analysis and compares them to the current literature on the male experience of psychological abuse and intimate partner violence.

3.1. Interpretation of interview 1

The Table 1 elaborates on the multifaceted consequences of psychological abuse and gaslighting for male victims. Participants described emotional abuse through gaslighting and said that contributors were lack of emotional support, expectation backlash, and dismissive communication. This was indicative of the manipulative behaviors that drain one's confidence and autonomy as described by Macassa et al., (2025). Tactics of this kind resulted in Self-Doubt and Internalized Blame, as men ruminated excessively on the interpersonal communication, engaged in self-censorship, and questioned their choices. This is in line with the assertion made by Lysova and Dim (2025). that dysfunctional masculine role expectations frustrate men's ability to recognize that they are victims of abuse and, as a result, they do not seek help. Psychological Distress as reported by participants, such as emotional detachment, irritability, and hypervigilance were also symptoms of the Psychological Distress described by Próspero, (2007) in relation to male survivors of IPV, and this was also consistent with the claims of the participants regarding deteriorated anxiety.

The participants' fears of being ridiculed and socially discredited for staying silent about issues that are manipulative and setting boundaries, their focus on self-isolation, the stigma associated with asking for help, and the remaining socially inactive, confirm the negative expectations of society in extending the emotional abuse (Hines et al., 2025). Even though it is a highly challenging circumstance, most men experience Isolation and Awareness to the extent that the majority of men gradually recognize it. When this occurs, they are in a position of self-empowerment and self-healing (Landa-Blanco & Mejía Sánchez 2025). The majority of the men emotionally distress the pain that is characterized internally, socially, and emotionally. Because of the stigma, men feel safe to emotionally abuse and manipulate other in IPV cases.

Table 1: *Thematic Analysis of Interview 1*

Main Theme	Secondary Theme	Supporting Quote
Gaslighting as Emotional Abuse	Dismissal of Opinions	Causes self-doubt and lowers self esteem.
	Contradictory Expectations	Builds confusion and dependence.
	Emotional Withholding	Controls and maneuver behavior through affection.
	Overanalyzing Interactions	Cause boundless reflection and guilt.
Self-Doubt & Internalized Blame	Self-Censorship	Conflict is avoided through lack of opinion.
	Second-Guessing Decisions	Causes loss of confidence in making decisions.
	Irritability	Heightens agitation and frustration.
	Emotional Detachment	Protective response to repeat behavior.
Psychological Distress	Hypervigilance	Psychological stress is increased by constant focus.
	Fear of Ridicule	Recreates silence and inhibits disclosure.
	Pressure to Solve Alone	Help is avoided because of masculine norms.
	Avoiding Vulnerable Conversations	Abuse is prolonged and emotional support is limited.
Silence & Social Isolation	Reduced Social Engagement	Isolation reduces help from outside sources.
	Identifying Manipulative Patterns	Recognizing and understanding of abusive behavior.
	Gradual Boundary Setting	Mark initial steps toward empowerment.

3.2. Interpretation of Interview 2

The Table 2 demonstrate that male victims of intimate partner violence suffer from various forms of emotional abuse. Participants in this study have experienced emotional exclusion, misleading praise, conditional support, and a myriad of gaslighting techniques

that undermine self-confidence and autonomy, consistent with Macassa et al., (2025). Such techniques contribute to Self-Doubt and Internalized Blame, where men over-apologized, and internalized responsibility for conflicts, and reflected Hines, Lysova, and Douglas (2025) findings of over-apologizing, fear of making mistakes and (some) even internalized responsibility for the conflicts.

Participants in these studies experienced Psychological Distress that included worry, emotional numbness, and anxiety, and as Lysova et al (2025) noted, male IPV survivors felt these stresses. The Stigma of Masculinity, Silence, and Social Isolation emerged as men withdrew from support and felt the sociocultural barriers to disclosure, and as Walker, (2020) noted, men fear judgment and strong. The challenges of the theme Awareness and Realization showed that most participants recognized gaslighting/manipulation and even started setting some boundaries. This is the first step toward recovery (Machado et al., 2024).

Table 2 :*Thematic Analysis of Interview 2*

Main Theme	Secondary Theme	Supporting Quote
Gaslighting as Emotional Abuse	Reframing Intentions	Partner restated his comments to criticize him.
	Selective Memory	Partner only remembered events in his favor.
	Emotionally Invalidating	“You’re too sensitive” and similar phrases.
Self-Doubt & Internalized Blame	Self-Scrutiny	Monitored tone and behavior.
	Minimizing Own Needs	Partner’s emotional needs were placed above his.
	Premature Acceptance	Blamed himself too quickly before grasping the dispute.
Psychological Distress	Mental Preoccupation	Relationship problems consumed his thoughts.
	Concentration Problem	Trouble focusing on work and daily activities.
	Somatic Symptoms	Headaches, restlessness, and muscle tension.
Masculinity-Based Stigma	Fear of Not Being Believed	Expected others to disregard his claims.
	Gendered Expectations	Belief that men should tolerate emotional pain.
Silence & Social Isolation	Relationship Avoidance	Avoided discussing relational problems.

Awareness & Realization	Social Circle Contraction		He slowly lost his friends. Noticed and identified the cycles of manipulation.
	Emotional Recognition	Pattern	
	Re-evaluating Relationship Norms		Examined what is “normal” in relationships.

3.3. Interpretation of Interview 3

Table 3 revealed the male experiences of gaslighting include forms of psychological manipulation such as intention rewriting, selective memory, and emotional invalidation, which erode credibility and self-trust (Espinoza & Warner 2016; Sweet, 2019). These practices instigate self-doubt, internalized self-blame, and self-silencing, in tandem with the foregoing evidence about the influence of masculinity norms on men’s emotional abuse coping (Tsui, 2014). Participants experienced cognitive and somatic reactions, which is in line with the studies that associate psychological IPV with chronic stress and functional impairment (Randle & Graham 2011). Believe disbelief, or fear of disbelief, along with expectation of females being more open, reinforced stigma and closed the support circle, self-disclosure, and ultimately to help-seeking (Burke et al. 2023).

Table 3: *Thematic Analysis of Interview 2*

Main Theme	Secondary Theme		Supporting Quote
Gaslighting as Emotional Abuse	Reframing Intentions		Partner restated his comments to criticize him.
	Selective Memory		Partner only remembered events in his favor.
	Emotionally Invalidating		“You’re too sensitive” and similar phrases.
Self-Doubt & Internalized Blame	Self-Scrutiny		Monitored tone and behavior.
	Minimizing Own Needs		Partner’s emotional needs were placed above his.
	Premature Acceptance	Fault	Blamed himself too quickly before grasping the dispute.
	Mental Preoccupation		Relationship problems consumed his thoughts.
Psychological Distress	Concentration Problem		Trouble focusing on work and daily activities.
	Somatic Symptoms		Headaches, restlessness, and muscle tension.

Masculinity-Based Stigma	Fear of Not Being Believed	Expected others to disregard his claims.
	Gendered Expectations	Belief that men should tolerate emotional pain.
Silence & Social Isolation	Relationship Avoidance	Avoided discussing relational problems.
	Social Circle Contraction	He slowly lost his friends.
Awareness & Realization	Emotional Recognition	Noticed and identified the cycles of manipulation.
	Re-evaluating Relationship Norms	Examined what is “normal” in relationships.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that gaslighting is a harmful form of psychological abuse among men, leading to self-doubt, emotional distress, and silence. Masculinity-based stigma and fear of disbelief limit disclosure and help-seeking, intensifying psychological harm. The findings highlight the need for greater recognition of male experiences of IPV and gender-inclusive support services.

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