

Exploring Iranian Men's Experiences of Delayed Disclosure of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Attention has grown around narratives of sexual harassment in recent years, yet a significant number of stories remain untold, particularly those of male victims or survivors. While the reasons behind these unspoken or delayed disclosures vary worldwide, the present study examines the factors influencing men, born and raised in Iran, to remain silent rather than disclose incidents of childhood sexual harassment until adulthood, and the impact of this silence on their lives. Five Iranian men, ranging in age from 28 to 40, participated in this qualitative study and had their experiences as victims interviewed. The consequences of non-disclosure are further investigated in the study, with a particular focus on mental health. Participants identified societal judgment and labeling as major reasons for their hesitation to speak out, fearing persistent stigma and the possibility of becoming targets for further abuse. Lack of sex education, cultural taboos surrounding sex, and proper mental health guidance are other significant concerns that have been mentioned. These experiences had profound effects on the participants' mental health, manifesting as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts and attempts both in childhood and adulthood. The findings underscore how societal expectations, gender roles, and stereotypes perpetuated by patriarchal norms contribute to the reluctance of Iranian men to disclose incidents of sexual harassment and seek assistance.

Keywords: childhood harassment, delayed disclosure, men's harassment, sexual harassment

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions" (World Health Organization, n.d.) yet its powerful and long-lasting impact on people's lives is frequently underestimated (Fernando, 2018). Sexual victimization is often seen as a problem involving female victims and male offenders. The underrepresentation of male victims is attributed to societal gender roles, sexual scripts, rape myths, and stereotypical perceptions, which cause extra pressure on men to identify as victims and seek help (Depraetere et al., 2020).

Men who account for approximately 75% of the one million annual suicide deaths worldwide, may face challenges in expressing emotions, including those related to experiences of sexual harassment, due to adherence to hegemonic masculine ideals (River & Flood, 2021). The gendering of emotions presents men with multiple avenues to pursue or contest these ideals, yet it can also render them vulnerable to suicide. In a paradoxical turn, suicide may become an alternative means for men to demonstrate masculinity (River & Flood, 2021). Understanding

the variables that prevent male victims of sexual harassment from disclosing their experiences is critical for designing effective interventions and support systems for male victims (Hlavka, 2017).

Social Cognitive Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1992), offers a valuable lens for examining sexual harassment by emphasizing observational learning, imitation, and modeling within a social context (Bandura, 1992). This study explores how cultural norms, and social constructions affect male victims' experiences, particularly in Iran. Social and cultural factors, such as norms and perceived consequences, contribute to delayed disclosure of childhood sexual harassment. The theory helps explain how these factors shape men's cognitive processes, self-beliefs, and perceptions, influencing their decision to seek help.

1.1 Iranian Sociocultural Context

1.1.1 Masculinity

Important themes in understanding masculinity in the Middle East include the expectation for men to provide for their families, how masculinity is shown through physical behavior, the complexities of sexual identity, and the use of violence to express masculinity (Ghannam, 2022). Iranian society is not exempt from these themes and has traditionally been patriarchal, with men holding positions of power in the home and in society in general, which often dominates women to their male family members (Hashemi, 2022). In Iran, masculinity is a multifaceted construct deeply rooted in cultural concepts of honor and reputation, called '*Ghyrat*,' which stresses male pride and the protection of family honor, shaping societal expectations and male behavior (Abedinifard, 2018). A man with '*Ghyrat*' is recognized for protecting his honor, including the protection of women and children, as a key aspect of his masculinity; those who fail to do so are considered '*bi Ghyrat*' or dishonorable (Saeidzadeh, 2019).

1.1.2 Rape Culture and Homophobia in Iran

Rape culture is a term used to describe a social setting that normalizes and justifies sexual violence, considers victims as inferior through victim-blaming, and creates a vicious cycle of violence (Hermes et al., 2023). In Iran also, the fundamental cultural idea of rape is based on the concept that the victim provoked the perpetrator(s) by supposedly disobeying rigid appearance and attitude norms (Malayeri et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a strong stigma attached to homosexuality, which contributes to social rejection rooted in heterosexism and homophobia by perceiving those who depart from traditional gender roles with hostility (Karimi, 2016). In the long term, this created a hostile environment for homosexual people and strengthened inflexible ideas of masculinity. In Iranian society, being a male victim of sexual harassment can reduce their status to that of a woman, or someone engaged in homosexual activities, and they may be blamed due to the prevailing rape culture.

1.1.3 Victimization

Considering the definitions mentioned in the previous sections, the dominant masculinity in Iranian culture complicates the perception of men as actual victims of sexual harassment. Notions of masculinity create powerful gender-based stereotypes within society by assigning specific roles and expectations to men and women. Persistent gender-based stereotypes contribute to the increasing taboo surrounding male sexual victimization (Browne, 2023). Male victims of harassment in Iran may experience feelings of pressure and shame due to fear of being perceived as weak or embarrassment to their families. In addition, cultural norms and a lack of support systems make it difficult for them to report or even acknowledge that they are

being victimized, which results in underreporting and a lack of awareness on this matter (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2022).

1.2 Islamic Republic of Iran's Legal Framework

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has reinforced its historically conservative views by adopting a framework of law and order based on 'Sharia', strengthening the country's traditional beliefs on sexuality (Malayeri et al., 2022). Sharia, or Islamic law, is a system of rules and guidelines affecting several aspects of a Muslim's life (Abdolahpour Chenari, 2022). According to the Iranian Penal Code (Article 234; The Islamic Penal Law, 2014), The punishment for the active participant in sodomy (anal sex between two men), if committed with force, coercion, or if the individual is married ('*Mohsan*'), is execution; otherwise, the punishment is 100 lashes. The sentence for the passive participant, regardless of marital status ('*Mohsan*' or '*non-Mohsan*'), is always execution (The Islamic Penal Law, 2014). It is noted that men under the age of 15 will not face execution but will instead be subjected to corporal punishment, such as lashes, at the discretion of the judge (The Islamic Penal Law, 2014).

1.3 The Present Study

While societal norms and schemas often associate sexual harassment primarily with women (Zacharko et al., 2022), this research underscores the persistent gap in acknowledging sexual harassment experienced by men. Male sexual victimization is concealed and challenging to grasp, contributing to limited awareness of this issue (Hlavka, 2016). In addition to the general gap in sexual harassment among men, there is a specific stigma around it in conservative societies including Iran. A study conducted among 1,500 university students in Iran revealed that 27% of men reported experiencing sexual harassment during childhood while this number is 11% for women (Vakilian et al., 2019). Although fewer women reported experiencing sexual harassment during childhood compared to men, women are more likely to disclose their experiences. The present study will address these stigmas by exploring the factors that prevent male survivors from revealing their sexual harassment experiences. The two objectives of this study are to explore the factors behind Iranian men's delayed disclosure of childhood sexual harassment and the impact of this delayed disclosure on their lives. By addressing this gap, the study aims to clear the way for the development of more tailored interventions and support mechanisms designed to assist male victims of sexual harassment (Thomas & Kopel, 2023).

The findings from this study will not only fill a significant gap in the literature but also inform mental health practitioners and policymakers about the unique challenges faced by male survivors in conservative societies. This research can contribute to the development of culturally sensitive support systems and interventions to encourage earlier disclosure and reduce the psychological burden on male survivors. This enhanced understanding holds the potential to improve mental health outcomes, emphasize the importance of seeking help, and alleviate feelings of isolation experienced by male survivors. The collective impact of these changes can lead to a reduction in suicide rates within society. Moreover, the current study's impact extends beyond research, benefiting government, academic institutions, and middle and high schools through given the prevalence of sexual harassment instances in school settings, particularly through bullying and power dynamics among underage students (Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020).

2. Methods

2.1 Research Method and Design

A qualitative research method was employed to meet the objectives of this study. Given that this research focuses on exploring men's experiences of childhood sexual harassment, a sensitive topic requiring an in-depth understanding of personal experiences, a phenomenological research design was selected. The purpose for adopting phenomenology design is because it is capable of exploring the collective experience of a community. Phenomenology design is suitable to understand the lived experience and subjective meaning in the eyes of the informants (Vignansky et al., 2018).

2.2 Sample and Location

In total five Iranian male participants ranged from 28 to 40 years old who were recruited through purposive sampling technique were participated in this study. For conducting a research with the purpose of providing a rich descriptive expression of the participants' emotions, purposeful sampling is the suitable approach (Frankel & Devers, 2000).

The participants were selected based on inclusion criteria such as they define their sexual identity as male, born and raised in Iran, and were sexually abused in their childhood, delayed the disclosure of their experience until adulthood, and hesitated to share the details of their traumatic encounter. The participants' demographics are contained in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Age	Number of Participants
25 to 30	1
30 to 35	3
35 to 40	1

2.3 Data Collection

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with five participants using various online platforms. To establish initial contact with potential participants, email and messaging platforms were utilized. Subsequently, online interviews were conducted using Skype, with each session lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The decision to use Skype ensured accessibility and convenience for participants, while ethical concerns were addressed by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and leveraging the platform's data encryption features to safeguard participant privacy. In accordance with phenomenological interview techniques, the researchers asked questions in a directed yet non-leading manner to explore the phenomenon under study (O'Halloran et al., 2018).

The interview questions focused on the factors contributing to delayed disclosure of childhood sexual harassment and the impact of this delayed disclosure on the participants' lives. They were asked the sample of the following questions during the in-depth interview: *"Before disclosing what were your biggest fears?"*, *"What factors do you believe made it difficult for you to discuss your experience?"*, *"How do you perceive behavioral changes in your society towards a man who disclosed his sexual harassment incident?"*, *"What are the challenges you ever faced in your daily life due to the pressure of not talking about your sexual harassment incident?"* and *"How do you believe the challenges you mentioned have affected your mental health?"*. To ensure the reliability and validity of the interview questions, experts in the field examined and verified them prior to the data collection procedures.

Three interviews were conducted in English, and two were conducted in Farsi. The recorded Farsi interviews were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. Back-translation checks were performed by independent bilingual Iranian-English speaker to ensure accuracy.

2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to examine the interview transcripts after the interviews. The thematic analysis process involved six steps: (1) becoming familiar with the transcripts by reading them thoroughly and identifying emerging themes through significant keywords; (2) grouping related themes to develop overarching master themes; (3) utilizing the initial themes from the first transcript to inform the analysis of subsequent transcripts, and then creating final themes after all transcripts had been analyzed; (4) the final outcome of this analysis is a detailed narrative account, where the researcher's interpretations are thoroughly explained (Gill, 2020). Upon completing the thematic analysis, the researcher was able to identify correlations between the collected data and social cognitive theory. To ensure the validity of the analysis, the coding results were reviewed by an expert panel, including a doctoral-level university lecturer, who assessed the researcher's data analysis and the generation of themes and categories to confirm that the analyses were consistent with the data.

3. Results

Following an in-depth exploration factors behind Iranian men's delayed disclosure of childhood sexual harassment and its impact on their lives, a delegation of 7 themes was derived.

3.1 Reasons of hiding the sexual harassment incident

There are four main themes that emerged from the data collected for the first objective of the study, including (1) societal judgment and labeling; (2) gender-based societal neglect influenced by stereotypes; (3) sexual taboos and education gaps; and (4) misbeliefs and traditional values.

3.1.1 Societal judgment and labeling

The participants felt judged and labeled by the society members, expressing concern that their identity as abused men would lead to stigmatization and long-lasting negative effects, both in school and their neighborhood. They highlighted the false assumptions about their sexual preferences, which contribute to the fear of repeated abuse and the desire to conceal their traumatic experiences.

“Somebody who was sexually abused was like a weak person and everybody, if they knew about it, would mock him, tease him, or even beat him because of that, and they would put name on them and say oh, you couldn't take care of yourself, you have a... you... you have a problem, you're just so weak person and everybody else wanted to kind of take advantage of that situation that putting that person in a weak position and taking advantage of him.” [Participant 5, 36 years old]

3.1.2 Gender-based societal neglect influenced by stereotypes

All participants reported a lack of support for men disclosing sexual harassment, often leading to victim-blaming and isolation. To avoid these outcomes, they kept their experiences hidden. The societal construct of masculinity, emphasizing emotional toughness and unyielding strength, pressured them to conceal any perceived weaknesses.

“Even to these days this is my concern and has an impact on me. In our society, men and boys are required to be strong, protect everyone, not to cry, never ever speak of anything like this which shows the weakness in his personality. As a boy if you speak about your failure to protect yourself or not being able to defend yourself, you would be judged and people would say why couldn't you protect yourself, aren't you a boy? aren't you a man?” [Participant 4, 35 years old]

3.1.3 Sexual taboos and education gaps

All participants shared that they were initially unaware they had experienced sexual abuse. Due to societal taboos and a lack of safe spaces for discussing sex, they felt unable to talk to family or friends. With generations raised with limited sex education, navigating and discussing these issues during instances of harassment became challenging.

“In my family and my culture, it was forbidden to talking about these things. And it was really ugly and dirty and really bad to even think of these things, let alone talking about these things. And, for example, parents... my... my parents at least never, ever, you know, told me anything about those things. They... they never gave me any awareness and then they themselves didn't have any awareness of those things. And that is the real problem because it is a generational lack of awareness going on and on.” [Participant 5, 36 years old]

3.1.4 Misbeliefs and traditional values

Four participants highlighted the influence of widespread cultural misconceptions about sexual relationships on their decision not to disclose. These misconceptions encompass both religious beliefs and traditional thought patterns.

“They said if you ever talk about sex or anything sexually related, you need to wash your mouth and clear it from your mind. So, if someone abused you and you wanted to talk about it, they immediately prevented it from happening. They would say stuff like, these are not good words, these are not good thoughts, probably you were wrong, it was your fault or something like that. They never ask you to come forward and talk about it if it ever happens to you, they had no empathy and they never cared about finding a solution for your struggle. This is the most important thing that causes fear for me. For example, if something like this happened in school and I wanted to talk about it to my parents, they would silence me immediately, telling me what these rude words are you saying? never speak of it again, it is not a good word. They prevent it from happening. These were the traditional beliefs from the past.” [Participant 4, 35 years old]

3.2 The impact of delayed disclosure on victims' lives

In the subsequent section, we delve into the repercussions of non-disclosure of sexual harassment incidents on well-being of the participants. We explore how harboring a traumatic event in secrecy for an extended period adversely affects the mental health of male victims, influencing various aspects of their daily lives and beyond that. The three main themes for the second objective of the study are (1) interruption of daily routine; (2) mental health impact of the incident; and (3) healing process.

3.2.1 Interruption of daily routine

All the participants detailed the influence of the incident and its associated stress on their daily routines at the time.

“Choosing a friend became so hard for me, I had to consider everything. For example, now that I am friends with this person, what if he does the same thing to me? Or label me! That is why I tried not to have deep friendships with people.” [Participant 3, 40 years old]

3.2.2. Mental health impact of the incident

Two of the participants described experiencing a range of mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, a decline in academic performance, increased aggression, and social withdrawal after being sexually abused.

“I became super aggressive, if anyone told me anything, even simple complaints, I would be angry so fast, that I would start shouting at them, and I did not have any idea it might have been the impact of those experiences.” [Participant 2, 28 years old]

Three participants revealed that their mental health symptoms have persisted into adulthood, continuing to manifest in various aspects of their lives.

“After this experience, you cannot trust yourself like before, you know? You are not the same person as you was, and it is always with you. You know? And you always think you are not good enough.” [Participant 1, 32 years old]

Among the five participants, one of them reported that he had suicidal thoughts and attempts for a long time and was completely isolated from people.

“After a while I can remember at age 16... 15... 16... 17 I was... I was completely paralyzed by my depression. I committed suicide a few times. I... I... I had nervous attack several times that I couldn't... that I couldn't do the normal thing in life.” [Participant 5, 36 years old]

3.2.3 Healing process

Three participants highlighted that the initiation of the healing process occurred when they began to disclose and discuss their sexual harassment incidents, either with someone, a group of people, or with a therapist during adulthood.

“After I disclosed, I had an amazing feeling, it was like I took off very old and dirty clothes from the closet, cleaned it, and put it somewhere in the corner, it was not irritating anymore. It was like its bad smell didn't bother me anymore. I had this special feeling after talking about my experience after years.” [Participant 4, 35 years old]

Data from five male participants who experienced childhood sexual harassment are presented in Table 2 as collective themes.

Table 2: Summary of themes

Objectives	Themes
Reasons of hiding the sexual harassment incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Societal judgment and labeling - Gender-based societal neglect influenced by stereotypes - Sexual taboos and education gaps - Misbeliefs and traditional values
The impact of delayed disclosure on victims' lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interruption of daily routine - Mental health impact of the incident - Healing Process

4. Discussion

This study intends to investigate the reasons behind hiding the sexual harassment incident among Iranian men and its impact on their lives. The study indicates that numerous factors contribute to the silence among Iranian men, with societal judgment and receiving labels being a paramount concern. Men are frequently indoctrinated from an early age to avoid showing signs of vulnerability, be tough, hide their feelings, and never show weakness (Weiss, 2008). For men who have been sexually abused, this deeply formed mentality acts as a barrier since it could be interpreted as an admission of weakness and a failure to defend oneself. This social norm not only makes it difficult for victims of male sexual harassment to come forward, but it also feeds negative perceptions that might help abuse continue. While prior studies (Easton, 2014), highlight the influence of masculinity in promoting silence, aligning with the findings of the current study, this research addresses an observational gap; the fear of being labeled among Iranian men is not merely an internalized notion but a concrete experience within the real-world context of victims. In the realm of male socialization, the stigma of being a victim is just as harmful as actively engaging in sexual harassment and bullying. It keeps men trapped in a cycle of victimhood, making them vulnerable to further exploitation.

The findings reveal that due to facing complete ostracization and devoid of societal support, men are compelled to bury their sexual harassment experiences deep within their trauma. The fear of being exiled and deemed "lesser" forces them to silence their voices after sexual harassment. This pressure to conform to narrow ideas of masculinity leaves them burdened with unspoken pain and reinforces the cycle of isolation. These results are similar to past studies (Easton, 2014), in which men with histories of childhood sexual abuse often struggle with gender role conflicts, finding it un-masculine to be labeled victims, compounded by issues of homophobia, shame, and stigma. In the model of masculine gender socialization, dominant societal groups shape gender norms emphasizing winning, self-reliance, emotional control, aversion to homosexuality, and pursuit of status (Easton, 2014). The observed similarity stems from men's unwillingness to talk about their experiences with sexual harassment, since doing so goes against their ideas of what it means to be a man. Men are often expected to be dominant and powerful in a patriarchal society; therefore, this internal struggle makes them hesitant to talk about their experiences.

Devoid of proper sex education, victims often grapple with confusion and fear during sexual abuse, even blaming themselves for something they don't understand. According to the findings of the current research, the strict taboos around sex in Iranian society and families exacerbate the issue. The previous research (Putri, 2022) also emphasized the importance of sex education for young adults and its role in preventing sexual harassment. This aligns with the outcomes of the current study, as education is power, and that power can help children protect themselves. The confusion above makes it extremely difficult for victims to speak out, thereby perpetuating the cycle of shame and silence.

This study found that outdated beliefs rooted in tradition and religion can silence victims of sexual harassment. These misconceptions often shift the blame onto the victims, making them feel responsible for the abuse. This result is aligned with the findings from the research conducted in Indonesia (Supriyanto, 2023), victim blaming continues to silence victims and often manifests as blaming women's behavior, attitude, or clothing, diverting attention away from the perpetrator's actions (Supriyanto, 2023). However, while the gender of participants and the countries in which the research took place are different, a similar trend of victim-blaming is observable in both. It seems possible that these results are due to some cultural,

traditional, and conservative atmosphere shared by Middle Eastern and Islamic Asian countries. Traditional values and religious interpretations within Iranian society create a complex landscape for male victims of sexual assault. Even when compared to women, male victims' actions or attitudes do not deviate from traditional expectations; nevertheless, they face harassment, abuse, and subsequent victim-blaming.

In addition to the finding mentioned above, the current study highlights an even deeper issue: the ingrained societal belief that victims inherently deserve such mistreatments. The prevailing belief is that male victims are themselves at fault, perceived as actively seeking homosexual encounters through their behavior, which provokes perpetrators. This perception is further compounded by the notion that engaging in any form of sexual activity, particularly homosexual behavior, is considered immoral and forbidden. Consequently, those perceived to be seeking such encounters are viewed as deserving of the suffering they endure. Additionally, rapists often target men who have been previously assaulted, driven by an internalized belief that these individuals, due to their preferred sexual preferences and attitudes, are deserving of further harm.

As revealed by the findings of this research, experiencing a traumatic event such as sexual abuse can lead to severe mental health challenges that may go unnoticed for a long time. Choosing to keep such incidents secret creates a barrier to addressing the trauma and its effects. Unresolved trauma can manifest in daily life through difficulties in completing tasks, obsessive anger, self-blame, and self-hatred (Çelik & Şenol Çelik, 2007). The victim's mental health is also deeply impacted by keeping the incident a secret, which can result in the emergence of serious psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders, substance misuse, and suicidal thoughts or attempts (Mountjoy & Edwards, 2022). The findings from the current study align with the results of previous study (Sujadi et al., 2023) which reported that these effects have a direct impact on a student's academic performance and ability to concentrate in class. The inability to openly discuss the problem can lead to feelings of isolation from friends, family, and other support systems (Sujadi et al., 2023). When people lack crucial support and help during or after a traumatic event, the negative effects intensify with each passing day. This silence and isolation only compound the severity of the trauma, leading to long-term emotional distress and perpetuating a cycle of suffering. In turn, these diseases have a direct and widespread impact on every aspect of their lives.

Similar to the findings of the current study, many theoretical frameworks have recognized the interpersonal process of telling someone else about sexual abuse as a crucial part of survivors' healing (Easton, 2014). Individuals and society can play a crucial part in supporting victims in developing resilience and coping with the aftermath of the traumatic experience, which can aid in mental healing and recovery, by attending to their needs and providing a secure and supportive atmosphere (Sujadi et al., 2023). Providing victims of sexual harassment with social support is essential for improving their mental health and helping them recover from mental health disorders.

4.1 Implications

Understanding the factors contributing to Iranian men's delayed disclosure of childhood sexual harassment is essential for designing effective support systems and interventions. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) provides a valuable framework for examining how societal norms, individual self-perceptions, and perceived consequences influence disclosure decisions (Graf et al., 2020). However, the unsupportive legal system of the Islamic Republic of Iran makes

disclosing sexual harassment incidents incredibly dangerous for men; thus, by applying SCT, interventions can be developed to specifically address the harmful cultural norms and gender expectations that contribute to the silence around male victimization.

Moreover, SCT highlights the role of self-efficacy and personal agency in behavior change. By fostering self-efficacy through educational programs and targeted resources, men may feel more empowered to disclose their experiences. These programs should focus on building emotional resilience, promoting self-awareness, and offering support mechanisms that reduce the stigma associated with male sexual harassment.

SCT also emphasizes the importance of positive role models and open communication. By dismantling patriarchal structures that reinforce gender inequality and creating a culturally sensitive environment that encourages dialogue, Iranian men may be more inclined to share their experiences. Promoting gender equality and fostering a supportive societal atmosphere can help normalize disclosure and facilitate healing processes for male survivors.

Ultimately, a culturally tailored approach that integrates SCT can lead to greater awareness, reduce the psychological burden on survivors, and improve mental health outcomes by creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for male victims of sexual harassment in Iran.

4.2 Limitations

One of the greatest challenges for this study was recruiting participants who were willing to openly discuss their experiences and share personal information, which contributed to the small sample size. Moreover, participants often struggled to articulate certain phrases or avoided using specific terms, as the subject matter is highly stigmatized and considered culturally inappropriate. The participants' hesitation and discomfort hindered them from expressing openly about their experiences, which made it difficult for the researcher to capture all the relevant information and complex emotions involved. Additionally, some participants acknowledged a sense of fear in revealing their experiences even during the interview process. These pressures may have hindered them from fully addressing every facet of their experiences.

4.3 Suggestions for future studies

Future studies should explore the intersection of patriarchy and perceptions of masculinity in male sexual victimization. Patriarchal norms reinforce rigid ideas of masculinity, often leading male victims to internalize guilt and weakness. Research could examine how these norms influence disclosure and explore interventions aimed at challenging harmful gender expectations and promoting equality.

Additionally, while much research focuses on sex education's role in preventing sexual harassment and supporting victims, there is a need to investigate its impact on potential perpetrators. Understanding how sex education shapes attitudes towards consent and healthy sexual relationships could lead to more effective prevention strategies.

5. Conclusion

This study conducted an in-depth inquiry into the factors that contribute to Iranian men's delayed disclosure of sexual harassment they experienced as children and the consequences of this non-disclosure on their lives. Important insights into the societal, cultural, and individual aspects driving their silence were discovered through qualitative research.

The findings of the research provide insight into the widespread judgment and shaming that Iranian men who experience sexual harassment must suffer. The participants conveyed concerns about being labeled and targeted for further abuse if they disclosed their experiences, underscoring the important part that gender stereotypes and cultural norms play in keeping people silent. Additionally, the lack of support from a gender-biased society and cultural taboos surrounding discussions about sex further compounded the challenges faced by these men.

The profound impact of delayed disclosure on the mental health and well-being of male survivors was also elucidated. Participants shared experiences of depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and even suicidal thoughts and attempts resulting from their unaddressed trauma. However, the initiation of the healing process began when their experiences started to be disclosed and discussed with others, emphasizing the critical importance of social support in facilitating recovery.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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