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Issues and Challenges Faced by Women with Breast Cancer: Case Studies from Multan

SAWERA SHAKEEL
Research scholar, Department of Sociology,
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.
Email: sawerashakeel006@yahoo.com

Dr. AMBREEN SALAHUDDIN
(Corresponding Author)
Assistant Professor of Gender Studies, Department of Sociology,
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.
Email: ambreen.salahuddin@umt.edu.pk
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5717-5969

MUHAMMAD NADEEM AKHTAR JANJUA
Lecturer, Department of Sociology,
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.
Email: nadeem.akhtar@umt.edu.pk

Abstract

Breast cancer is malignant cancer that happens due to the abnormal growth of cells. Breast cancer often happens in women, but in very few cases it happens in males. This paper is designed to identify the issues and challenges faced by women with breast cancer. The main aim of the research is to explore the issues and challenges faced by women with breast cancer and to evaluate the changes in their physical, social, economic, psychological, and sexual life due to which their life is affected. The study is qualitative in nature and research design is phenomenological. In-depth interviews with women from Multan were conducted. The paper evidently accentuated the effect of cancer on women's life course and their experiences and this paper also discovered several motivations to overcome with these issues.

Keywords: *Breast Cancer, Socio-economic Challenges, Psychological Issues, Women's Health.*

Introduction

Among all cancers, breast cancer is considered common amongst females (Ferlay, 2010). Cancer is considered to be more severe than other diseases due to severe adverse effects on human beings' physical condition (Donnelly et. al, 2013). As indicated by Nakatani et al. (2013), breast cancer is one of the most dangerous events women can experience. Diagnosis is often associated with anxiety and depression (Nakatani et. al, 2013).

There are two major driving reasons for death; one is lung cancer while the other is breast cancer (Zhou, 2013). But with the production of new technology 60% of females have recovered in 6 years of post-diagnosed. It is currently perceived by research that at the end of treatment, female's sexual life is affected for a very long time and for the most part, and also may get affected by severe physical and emotional side effects (Zhou, 2013). Social help is frequently the main indicator for a good healthy life (Lewis & Manne, 2001). It was found in investigations that low social help is a critical factor about the quality of life in patients (Williams C, 2000).

Even after treatment is complete, few females continue to experience the ill impacts of physical and treatment-related problems, as well as psychological grief, tension, and depression. (Nakatani et. al, 2013). Also, breast cancer requires a long-term treatment (Donnelly et al., 2013). In Damocles syndrome, the fear of cancer hangs over cancer survivors for short or long periods of time, leaving them emotionally paralyzed and no longer able to enjoy life as they once did. As a result, Damocles syndrome can impact on QOL and major life decisions, such as getting married or changing jobs (MacDonald, 2015).

In Pakistan, it is the most common form of cancer as in other countries. Breast cancer kills 40,000 women each year in Pakistan, according to various studies. As cited in a study (Syed, 2020), "According to updated data from Globocan in 2020, there were 1,78,388 reported cases of breast cancer in Pakistan." The cases of breast cancer is expected to increase day after day, according to the WHO report. Due to Breast cancer mortality rate is high in Pakistan, because it is diagnosed at late stages. There is very little information about breast cancer in Pakistan. One reason for high breast cancer rates in Pakistan is marriages with cousins due to a genetic mutation that increases the chance of developing a disease (Shaukat, Ismail et al. 2013).

Literature Review

According to a research, breast cancer has become the most common disease in women worldwide, with approximately 2.1 million diagnoses each year and 627,000 deaths in 2018 (F. Bray, J. Ferlay, I. Soerjomataram, R. L. Siegel, L. A. Torre, and A. Jemal, 2018). Women who do not believe they are at risk of developing breast cancer may be unconcerned about the usage of early diagnosis procedures such as mammography (T. A. Allo, P. A. Edewor, and D. Imhonopi, 2019).

In numerous parts of the world, Cancer is considered as the most common health issue (Siegel et al., 2011). The ratio of mortality in economically developed and under developed nations is increased. Breast cancer represents 23% of the aggregate cancer cases (Jemal et al., 2011) and critically its prevalence rate of female malignancy is still increasing all over the world (Althuis et al., 2005).

In general, the word "Cancer" is a cause of stress, anxiety and tension. In Pakistani society, mentioning cancer receives glares of concern and sympathy from society in general. Additionally, a qualitative analysis found that Pakistani women see cancer as the end of life. They feel regretful on diagnosis and think about it as the anger of God (Banning & Tanzeen, 2014). In another qualitative research, one of the 30 respondents shared that her stress and depression were because of a poor facility where she did not get proper treatment (Banning et al., 2009).

In Pakistan, it is trusted that breast cancer can cause growth in young women and unmarried females are in more danger of psychosocial issues. Having all these psychosocial issues, many women visit '*Pirs*' and '*Hakims*' before consulting a doctor. It has been discovered that many females who have a lump in their breast report it after two long periods of cancer development, and also that delaying treatment significantly reduces a cancer patient's chances of survival. (Sharma et al, 2012). Pakistan has the highest rate of breast cancer among Asian countries (Rashid et al, 2006), which represents the exact rate that 34.6% of female related malignancies illness (Bhurgri, 2004); (Banning et al., 2009). Every year in the United States and throughout the world, breast cancer is the most difficult period for women. Psychological studies have revealed that it has an unanticipated influence on patients' social and private life (Compas and Luecken, 2002). It has a significant impact on women's self-perception and personal satisfaction (Gorman, 2011). Tariq and Hassan (2015) investigated self-perception and personal happiness of young and middle-aged married women surviving surgery. Previous studies have shown that self-perception and personal satisfaction of women with breast cancer are affected by their age (Pakseresht. Ingle & Gang, 2011).

Physical changes such as the loss of breasts, scars from medical treatment, hair loss, weight gain, or tragedy make a woman feel humiliated and afraid that people would look down on her and feel sorry for her. Their

sexual attraction towards their spouses is also reduced when they are unhappy with their self-perception. A woman who has been diagnosed with breast cancer may have real anxiety to anticipate losing a part of her body as a result of these changes. Friends and family members may have a tougher time coping with the changes that occur in a patient's life. Breast cancer patients face a lack of social support and adjustment problems in their daily lives (Helms, O'Hea, & Corso, 2008). According to the research Sasso and Naz studied the experiences of women and their perceptions of looking for and dealing with breast cancer in this study. They met seven women from Peshawar, Pakistan, who had breast cancer and had cured. All members were unaware of the therapy method before started the treatment procedure and had fear in their minds. They were both hesitant and worried about starting their treatment. Regardless, their perspectives regarding breast cancer, and possibly their whole lives, were altered once they were healed (Sasso & Naz, 2016).

Role Theory

We used theoretical concepts from role theory () to better understand the phenomenon of breast cancer. In this theory, People have assumed a role according to their expectation and perform their role in life. Kimberley and Osmond say that Role theory observes that our roles how is affected in behavior, attitudes, thought and social connection. Sometimes people perform more roles in their lives. Physical health issues are also considered in this theory. They affect and change the functions and social responsibilities. Role theory can change the social functions of women (). These changes also affect women in terms of relationships and the capacity to achieve their roles. Cancer treatment has a negative effect on females. Women encounter stress and they avoid friends and family (Brannon & Feist, 2013).

A role is the ordinary behavior of a person. Individuals conquer specific social position that leads to opportunities for them to perform in a positive way or fulfill positive role (Minne, 2011). Everyone has some expectations as a result of living in a society (Barker, 2003). If anyone is diagnosed with breast cancer then the behavior and attitude changes according to mental stress (Prigozin, 2010)

Methodology

According to the nature of the research title, researchers decided to use qualitative research method in this research, as it enables the researcher to study the issues and challenges faced by women who suffer from breast cancer. Also, it was intended that effects on economic, psychological, sexual and social functioning of women should also be explored.

The population (Boddy, 2016) for the research were those women who were suffering from breast cancer and have had or were having surgery and chemotherapy.

A sample of the population of women was selected based on the following criteria;

- Women aged between 30-70 years.
- Women suffering from breast cancer.
- Women having or recently completed surgeries, therapies, radiation, and chemo for breast cancer treatment at Nishter Hospital Multan.

The researchers reached the women to interview through one of the patients already undergoing treatment at Nishter Hospital, Multan. Face to face interviews with seven women were conducted by using semi-structured interview guide.

Themes and subthemes that were given in the interview guideline focused on economic, social, psychological and personal functions of women living with breast cancer. The themes are divided into sub-themes and the subthemes focused on the social function of women in family, in society, women's

relationship with herself, relation with family as wife, mother, daughter, caregiver, relation with her work, relation with her friends. Data collected through in-depth interviews was transcribed and coding was used following the themes in the interview guide.

Finding and Discussion

The research findings are discussed according to following themes. These themes help in explaining and understanding research concerns.

Cancer

Understanding of Cancer

Many people are unable to understand the disease and reasons for breast cancer. They think it is just a common illness and something that can affect our lives. But most people have knowledge about cancer. Participants think that it is a horrible disease that can lead to death. Participant 1 said, "My perception about breast cancer is that it is incurable and if once someone suffer from breast cancer, she will definitely be killed". Participant 2 said that: "Breast cancer is a very dangerous disease. Some women feel hesitation to get it diagnosed. Nowadays there are a lot of advanced treatments for the breast cancer but I constantly feel fear." Participant 3 described cancer in this way that, "It is a common disease that can be treated". Participant 4 said, "Breast cancer is like a symbol of death for me." Participant 5 said, "For me, breast cancer is a common disease which can be treated but I am scared because of chemotherapy." Participant 6 said, "Life is at a risk. For me any disease whether it is cancer or any other illness, is associated with mental health problems like depression."

According to the research of the center where people were diagnosed with cancer, shows that cancer is like a death symbol. When women were diagnosed with breast cancer, they did not know about it and were also unable to tell another person but they knew that the tumor will be removed. People need awareness regarding cancer so that they will be able to share it with their families and also remove breast cancer (Venter, 2008:29).

Feelings at Time of Diagnosis

In some cases, breast cancer diagnosis in women remains hidden due to shame, loneliness, and negative comments made by others (Chen, Liu, Li, & Su,, 2017). Because of the presumed stigma and society's attitude toward breast cancer patients, many women sometimes hesitate to tell their relatives and friends about their illness (Mehrabi, Hajian, Simbar, Hoshyari, & Zayeri, 2016). It is clear that participants had a mixture of emotions with breast cancer. These emotions are shock, disbelief, fear, and sadness. All these feelings are found during the diagnosis of breast cancer (Fitch et. al, 1999). Participant 1 said, **"**During diagnosis, I was worried and had negative thoughts that what if breast cancer spreads more, causing hair lose with other complications and I will die soon".

Participant 2 and participant 6 shared similar thoughts saying they felt that their life is near to end and were worried about their children. Participant 3 stated that she was surprised because it is not something you really want to hear. Participant 4 said that there is no past history of breast cancer in her family. Participant 5 said that, "I accept it, I made myself positive by saying that it is something that is mine. It is not going to do anything to me. It would have been worse if it were my arm or my leg or my eye or something."

Feelings during Treatment

Regarding the side effects of treatment, some participants experienced intense emotions during the treatment. Participant 1 said, "I was feeling sad and during my treatment, I prayed to God that please give

me life." Participant 2 said, "I made peace with this, I accept it and I ask only God to help me." Participant 4 said, "I felt really scared. It is a little traumatic to go for an operation." Participant 5 said that she felt shame." Participant 6 said, "It was a painful time. I just pray to God to give me a healthy life for the sake of my kids."

Side Effects Experienced

Going through any treatment for any disease is a traumatic process. If one is suffering physically, it will also affect mental health. The majority of the patients left their jobs to look after themselves; while others change jobs to less demanding jobs to reduce stress and anxiety (Swanberg, Nichols, Ko, Tracy & Vanderpool, 2017). Some patients also face some side effects. Participant 1 said, "My treatment was completed in three stages. During surgery, I was feeling relaxed but chemotherapy is a very complicated and painful treatment." Participant 2 said, "The effects of treatment were very shocking for me. I lost my hair and my nails color turned black. Eye color was also changed. I felt weakness which involves body pain ^{after} the completion of treatment."

Participant 4, 5 and 6 stated that they had hair loss. Participant 4 said that: "During and after operation, I was okay but during chemotherapy, I lost my hair which was very embarrassing." The side-effects of breast cancer treatment vary from person to person. Some lost their hair totally, other experience changes in weight or experience nausea and vomiting (). Research shows chemotherapy can affect a female's regular life. Their daily life activities are also affected due to this. (Prigozin. Uziely & Musgrave, 2010).

Social Functioning of Women with Breast Cancer

Experiencing changed personality

Going through an illness makes one carefully look at themselves. One can point out the things he/she was doing wrong and want to make it right. Participants observed all possible personality changes that they experienced during breast cancer. Participant 1 said that, "I was afraid after knowing that I have breast cancer but it made me closer to Allah. I started offering my prayers. It gave me a light of hope so I'm very optimistic in my approach. I always feel good."

Participant 2 said, "I am sure I will be improving my health during treatment. Because my doctor gives me hope that I will be alright after a few months**."** Participant 3 stated that as breasts and hair are the symbol of beauty for women. When her breasts are removed, she feels that she is losing her femininity. Participant 5 said, "It is difficult when I have to tell myself every time to be positive and calm." After the interviews, it was found that there are a lot of changes that appear after the detection of breast cancer. All patients after the diagnosis of breast cancer and treatment felt a change in their personality. They started concentrating on the essential things in life. But one thing is important, that this disease made women honest (Bell, 2009).

Changes in the Role of Mother

There is no home without a mother. A mother acts as a pillar and a foundation. Participant 1 stated that her will power as a mother is strong. She performs her duties in a good manner. She also takes care of her children. She can easily manage her daily routine life. Participant 2 said, "My children also want me to be healthy. They pray for my life. They also do not have any issue with my appearance but they were little stressed." Participant 3 said, "It is very difficult for my children to accept the reality. They don't talk about this with me so it's very difficult for me to understand what they are thinking." Participant 4 said, "It's really difficult for me to do any work. I don't have physical power." Participant 5 and 6 shared similar thoughts that they do all the housework and no one is available to help them.

The Economic Life of Women with Breast Cancer

Economic Burden

The economic effect of breast cancer in women is greater because these women are less productive as a result of adverse treatment side effects, which leads to job absences, reduced working hours, and higher hospital expenses (Ekwueme & Trogdon, 2016; Pisu, Azuero, Benz, McNees & Meneses, 2017). In majority of cases, the treatment for the side effects requires additional expenses, which are paid entirely by the patients (Palesh et al., 2018). When asked about economic issues, Participant 1 stated: **"**It was very expensive. The hospital offer discount in treatment, and then they just agree for 70% discount. Remaining expenses was pay by the patients, and for a poor person it is very difficult to pay the remaining 30%." Participant 2 said, "Though whole surgical treatment and post-surgical chemotherapy treatment is funded by the government even then we spent a lot on diagnostic tests and traveling expenses." Participant 3 said that: "It is really expensive treatment including expenses like traveling or taking meals from outside. My husband had his salary cut due to absences from his duties. We also spent our whole life savings." Participant 4 said that: "My brother pays all the expenses of treatment and it is very expensive, especially chemotherapies." Participant 5 and 6 did not respond to this question.

Treatment of breast cancer is very expensive so everyone cannot afford the expenses of the hospital. Few hospitals provide free treatment. Due to limited beds in the free hospital, they are not accommodating every patient of breast cancer.

Work Life

Some of the reasons why some cancer patients stop medications have been ascribed to the economic burden of breast cancer (Sanuade et al, 2018). Participant 1 said, "I am a housewife and not working outside the house. My responsibility is to handle my house and children." Participant 2 and 3 gave the same answer as participant 1. Participant 4 said, "I am a working woman and it is difficult for me to go to office after cancer treatment. I am also going through hair loss. I cannot face my colleagues."

Participant 5 said, "I am a working woman. I have double duties to perform at office and in the house. With breast cancer treatment it is very difficult to manage both duties because it is time-consuming treatment." Due to social misunderstandings regarding breast cancer, females with breast cancer endure loneliness, disengagement, and unbearable social reactions (Al-Azri et al., 2014; Taha, Al-Qutob, Nyström, Wahlström, & Berggren, 2012)

The Psychological and Sexual Life of Women with Breast Cancer

According to research, the negative impacts of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment harm women physically, psychologically, and socially (Lan, Jiang, Li, Sun, & Ma, 2020; Rana et al., 2017). Participant 1 said, "My husband is very understanding. He wants me to live a healthy life so he has no issues. My chemotherapy doctors told me that chemotherapy will affect my sexual desire." Participants 2 said, "Even after the cancer my relationship with my husband is good, we always spend quality time and have a good sexual relation." Participant 3 said that due to the side effects of chemo, her sexual relationship was affected but her husband understood her condition." Participant 4 said, "Breast cancer and its treatment is a social dilemma. I was cut off from the community. People looked down at me with pity and sometimes laugh at me which was traumatic for me psychologically."
Participant 5 said that

In our community long hair and attractive breasts are a sign of femininity. When I lost my breasts, I was and still I am under severe psychological trauma. I feel that I am not a complete woman. I have to face people with my shaved head and asymmetrical chest.

Participant 6 said, “Due to the side effects of chemotherapy, my sexual life got disturbed which had psychological effects on me.” Cancer treatments have harmful effects on sexual activity. The change is for the patient to distinguish among sexual and physical sexual ability (Monga, 2002). Females diagnosed with breast cancer have been taken as if they have been cursed, and their husbands consider them as unfit. This could have a negative influence on these women's health, so health care professionals should use practical educational methods to promote social trust and people understanding about breast cancer (Asobayire & Barley, 2015).

The Social Network of Women with Breast Cancer

Changes Experienced in Social Network

When a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer in some cultures, it is regarded as a sign that she has been cursed or doomed, and people avoid the sick person for fear of inflicting the wrath of their forefathers (Muliira, Salas & O'Brien, 2017). After breast cancer is diagnosed, it is very difficult to manage social networking with others. There is mostly focus on the treatment of cancer. Many participants have social support but, in most cases, we found that social networks do not support us during cancer. They think it is impossible to remove them. Participant 1 said, “I got very supportive friends they help me all the time.” Participant 2 said, ‘Media give us complete information about breast cancer but mostly our social networks do not support us. They avoid us due to this disease. But my friends gave me full support and guided me.” Participant 3 said that she thinks that she can complete her treatment because of her sister’s support.”

Participant 4 said, “Some of my friends felt sorry for me, some laughed at me. Due to these behavioral changes in my friends I became totally cut off from them. Now I spend my time with my family and in prayers.” Participant 5 and 6 shared similar thoughts that their family and friends supported them.

Conclusion

It is concluded that breast cancer has psychical, psychological and social effects on women’s lives. One of the biggest taboos of Pakistani culture is if women have breast cancer, they should avoid speaking about it publicly, as it is too private to talk about. The study shows that breast cancer patients go through the journey of grief during treatment of cancer. The adverse effect of breast cancer definitely has negative effects on patients but they chose to have a positive mindset with regard to their disease. Knowledge of cancer helps us to know the intensity and statistics of survival. Breast cancer effects and changes a woman’s self-image and this change varies from mild to moderate to severe.

Breast cancer in any woman's life is an emotional and psychological trauma. Women who are not mentally strong suffer from severe depression, anxiety, low confidence level, negative self-esteem and self-image. They also try to isolate themselves out of fear and shame. But some women with very strong will power took cancer as a challenge and their personality groomed more. They not only keep themselves calm and hopeful but also served as a role model for other patients of breast cancer. Social support is very important for everyone as it gives them hopes to cope with the tough time and reassure to live a healthy and happy life but not everyone has social support.

Similar conclusions have been observed in a number of investigations. In context of financial troubles, some companies promised to help some workers to pay their hospital fees. Though these promises frequently made, but they are hardly kept (Sanuade et al., 2018; Twahir et al., 2019; White-Means, Dapremont, Davis, & Thompson, 2020)

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