Teenage Suicide in Hunza (Causes and consequences)

By Salma Khan

Submitted to ma’am Alia Amir Ali

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of
Degree for masters in Gender studies academic year 2017

Email salmaa.mirr1@gmail.com

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE IN GENDER STUDIES
QUAID-I-AZAM UNIVERSITY ISLAMABAD
Info.cegs.edu.pk
Abstract

Suicides are a rising phenomenon in Hunza as well as in Gilgit-Baltistan generally, but there is silence around the issue. But what is often overlooked is that much of suicides are committed by young people, teenager in particular. This dissertation examines the causes and effects of teenage suicide in Hunza through qualitative research conducted with the family members, relatives and close friends of teenage suicide committers and five teenagers separately in Hunza. It also explores the impact of teenage suicides on other teenagers in Hunza and how perceptions of the causes of male and female suicides differ, and this research intends to investigate whether these perceptions are accurate. Using feminist methodology, thirty in-depth interviews has been conducted to ask about the causes and effects of suicide in their own words in the form of stories because suicide is perceived as a matter of shame and dishonor for the families and the community at large, which is why the issue remains hidden and taboo. The research findings showed that the major reasons behind teenage suicides are studies pressure, child parent gap, modernization, both physical and verbal violence in homes moreover there are also such cases where the cause of death was not actually suicide but presented as suicide. The research findings, especially data from suicide notes left behind by committers, showed that in various cases, suicides were conceived by the committers as a form of sacrifice and revenge. This research also attempted to document the methods being used by these teenagers to commit suicide, and whether these methods are different from those used in the past. The major causes of teenage suicides in Hunza is that suicide badly traumatized and effect the health of the people who are near to committers. Like due to teenage suicides, suicidal imagination amongst teenagers is quite high and family relations were complex and different for male and female teenagers. By introducing a family education and providing platform to youth, we can cope with the issue of suicides.

Key words: Suicide, causes, consequences, teenagers, taboo
Introduction

Suicide is an act of hurting oneself with a desire to take one’s own life” Reyes et al (2015). Suicide for family is an awful tragedy, for community darkly threatening and for religion it issues many challenges (Savear, 2009).

According to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), “committing suicide in the teenage years can be perceived as the ultimate rejection of family, of significant of other and of the society”. It is the third leading cause of death in the world for young people ages 14 to 24. Fleischmann and Bertolote (2003) described that suicide not only affects the individuals who took their lives, but whole society. Lives of closely related people of committers are socially, economically and mentally disturbed (Fleischmann and Bertolote 2003:69).

Suicides in Pakistan has shown an increase from many years, according to WHO (2002) “one million people worldwide, including 15,000 Pakistanis, commit suicide yearly”. Moreover HRCP (2012) report, “1,153 people attempt and 2,131 commit suicides across Pakistan yearly”. While Murad Khan (2008), estimates that “7000 commit suicide and 50,000 to 150,000 people attempt suicides annually in Pakistan”. Despite being a major epidemic issue, the rate of suicides is absented in National Annual Mortality Statistics in Pakistan due to which national rates are neither known nor reported.

In countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India there were strong androcentric norms which insists teenagers to stay in exploitative and discriminative environment that appear to be the one of factor that lead to suicide (Ying-Yeh Chin et al: 2012).

In teenagers, suicidal ideation and attempts are also increased when friends suicide has encouraged greater suicidal thinking, suicide attempts, higher depression and trauma among youth (Feigelman & Gorman, 2008). Household composition also impact the risk of suicide mortality for its inhabitants. A person living in families with arguably stronger sources of social support and integration have decreased risk of suicide. These processes are associated with decrease in birth rates, which reduce family size. As family reduce the number of responsibilities and interaction with children are also reduce, as consequence suicide risk is increased (Durkheim, 1966).
The history of suicide in Hunza is as old as history of Hunza and proper documentation of suicide cases is not available. According to senior citizens of Hunza, in ancient times usually people from 25-60 years commit suicide, while suicide among teens from 14-20 is absent and after 1950s with advancement of Hunza society, suicide among teenagers started.

Hunza district, well known for its highest literacy rate, tourism hub and exemplary entrepreneurship reveals worrisome result on suicide. As compared to other areas in Gilgit-Baltistan, Hunza is well known for its hospitality, honor, peace and educated people. “If people have everything they want then why suicides are increasing yearly”?

There are also many areas in GB where there is lack of education, health facilities and unemployment but why there is no any case of suicide is witnessed? Maybe there are also cases of suicide in other areas of GB, but maybe they are not being reported? Despite being educated people in Hunza, families do not report cases and keep them hidden, because they always relate suicide with their status as well as honor of their religion and region.

In Hunza, there are numerous commonly held perceptions about male and female suicide i-e females commit because of their love affairs and relationships while male commit suicide because of studies pressure and unemployment. On the off chance that a girl commit suicide, the whole society accuse that girl for her passing rather than discover why she has commit suicide while in the occasion when a boy presents suicide, female is considered in charge of his destruction. They generally contend that female suicide is a private matter and it ought to stay inside the field of family or home.

When we look at researches about suicide in Gilgit-Baltistan which were conducted in past, they are not satisfying because they only gave us figures, ratios and gender stereotypes of Gilgit-Baltistan. The main problem with the literature is that they only discuss female suicides especially women, on the other hand suicides among males are also very high. Suicide statistics in the province Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan according to some news sources, researches and reports are as follow.

Pamir Times reported that from 1996-2016, 300 people have commit suicide while Passu Times also reported that from 2005-2015, 369 people have commit suicide in Ghizer. Moreover, Burushal Times reported that since 1995, more than 260 people have commit suicide in district

Here we just have measurements of Ghizer and Gojal, while other principle territories including Gilgit city, Skardu, Chilas, Diamer, Ghanche, Yasin, Nager and Hunza are absent. Most of the statistics are showing an increase in suicide in recent years. Why is this so? Is there increase in reporting of cases or suicides are expanding?

When a person is contemplating suicide, access to specific methods might be the factor that leads to translation of suicidal thoughts into action. The danger of available methods might determine whether the outcome is fatal or not (Keith Hawton & van Heeringen 2009). There are several methods to commit suicide but in Hunza, jumping from high cliff, hanging and gun shooting are major methods.

As a native and relative of teenage suicide committer, researcher will explore why teenagers are committing suicides, what are the conditions which faced by teens due to which they commit suicide and what are their effects on other teenagers. Researcher will find the effects of teenage suicides on families, relatives, friends, community and on teenagers of Hunza and a common perception regarding suicide this area.

This research will provide a base for other students to conduct their research on this same topic because very little work is done on this issue before. This is also significant for me personally, because I was also effected when my close cousin commit suicide, therefore I want to highlight how young people, especially girls, are effected in their families. This research will also work on methods of suicide in Hunza, because this is a very under-researched aspect of Gilgit-Baltistan.

**Methods and methodology**

This research was carried out in Hunza, district of Gilgit-Baltistan using feminist methodology mainly qualitative method. So, using feminist methodology thirty in-depth interviews have been conducted, twenty-five with suicide committer’s relatives, friends, and family while five separately with teenagers. Suicide notes left behind by suicide committers are one of source of data for researcher. Researcher has use purposive and snow ball sampling and used note taking, to note down thoughts and impression during interviews. Using semi-structure questionnaires,
interviews were conducted in local language “Burushaski” which is the mother tongue of people in Hunza, then they are translated into English. After gathering the whole data, it was divided it into themes and sub-theme. The data which was have collected regarding sample are based on information given by their family, friends, relatives and suicide notes.

Researcher has offered name to respondent in order I-e victim "A" to "O", because of research ethics. My research sample are 15 suicide committers from which 11 were females while 4 are male. Their age ranges from 12 to 19 years. They were understudies from ninth to graduation and all were firmly affiliated with religion. The most widely recognized method of suicide among these victims are hanging and jumping from high cliff. Research have examined cases from 2000 to 2016.

**Data Analysis and Discussion**

In Hunza, there are numerous commonly held perceptions about male and female suicide i-e females commit because of their love affairs while male commit suicide because of studies pressure and unemployment. On the off chance that a girl commit suicide, the whole society accuse that girl for death rather than discover why she has commit suicide, while in the occasion when a boy commit suicide, female is considered in charge of his destruction. They generally contend that female suicide is a private matter and it ought to stay inside the field of family or home. People consider suicide as “natural phenomenon” and commit because they have “subtle heart”. None of research has been done on perception about suicide before.

Suicide, according to teenagers is the result of violence, lack of support, trust, understanding, studies pressure, failure in love affairs, lack of sharing, frustration, and male dominancy. Each case is different from other due to which the reasons or causes of suicide are differ but there are also factors or reasons which are similar with each other. The major causes of teenage suicide in Hunza is educational pressure, domestic violence (both verbal and physical), child-parent gape. During research, it is also found that some teenagers commit suicide to take revenge from their family, while few sacrifice their life for betterment of their siblings. It is also found that some teenagers, especially females were killed by their family when they come to know about their love affairs but later they presented it as suicide.
Furthermore, suicidal history is also a cause behind the suicides, like two or more people commit suicide in one family, may also offer suicidal thoughts to the other who left behind. And there are few cases were witnessed in which two or more people have commit suicide in one family. As it was discussed above that every case is different from other, therefore causes of suicide are also differ. Some have also commit suicide because of their health issue and body ambiguity.

In Hunza, modernization has also lead some teenagers to commit suicide because it is passing through a series of development due to which people changed but their norms and values did not change. Because of that parents do not accept their children needs which leads to suicides.

When a person commit suicide, it effects other individuals who are living near to them. The consequences of suicide are not only that an individual is die that precious life has ended. It is most devastating and effect family members, friends, relative and loved ones of the person who has died by suicide can be severe far-reaching. Julie Cerel et al (2008) argued that “Suicide in a family decrease the cohesion or emotional bonding”. Death of loved one by suicide can be traumatic for the whole family. There are additional feelings which was found in research, are extreme guilt to not preventing the suicide of their sibling or child, confusion, anger, distress, shock, emotional withdrawal from others and an extreme level of grief.

Patrick Savear (2009) argued that suicide is the most awful tragedy for parents. From fifteen suicide committer’s parents, six were mentally disturbed, three became heart patient, one was paralyzed and four were physiologically shock. But the interesting thing is that, except one respondent (paralyzed), all of them are women means mothers of suicide victims. While two of female respondents (mothers of victims) are normal. There is also difference in suffering of parents, like due to our social norms and gender construction men cannot express their sorrow and pain openly which make them weak from inside.

Like parents, suicide also effect victim siblings. Most of siblings feel guilty that they did not do something to help them. It affects them mentally and sometime traumatized them. Majority of siblings of victims feel shame and embarrass to accept that their siblings had commit suicide. Likewise, siblings, suicide also effect relatives and they become depressed for their own child if they do such act. After family, relative and siblings, friends are those to whom an individual share everything, therefore they effected equally after suicide of their friend. Author William Feigelman et al (2009) also argued that friend’s suicides have encourage suicidal thinking,
depression and trauma among youth. Almost all of friends of suicide victims were traumatized and feel guilty that they could not save the life of their friend. Authors William Feigelman and Bernard S (2009). Gorman, Julie Cerel et al (2008) and Patrick Savear (2009:172-175) described that suicidal ideation, attempts and complete suicides among teenagers is due to increasing suicides, religious funeral and teenage suicides. Due to increasing teenage suicide in Hunza suicidal imagination among teenagers is very high. According seven-teenage respondent, they have think many times about committing suicide. But it was found that it effects male and female differently. Emerging issue of suicide has badly effect female teenagers because parents thought that due to love affairs girls commit suicide therefore, their parents keep them bound, restricted and become more vulnerable. While boys in this context gets benefit because they are male and their lives are precious therefore their all unwanted demands were fulfilled.

Female teenagers argued that “Our parents show more concern toward our brothers” which means that boys being important source of income for parents in future therefore, they give more care and love to their boy’s child.

One’s death is not the end but the beginning for those who are still living (Dyregroy 311). Suicide not only effect the family and close members but also whole society or community as well. According to Patrick Savear (2009) suicide for community is darkly threatening.

It effects are more on those who see the body of victims, according to one community member “I have taken four bodies of suicide victims from cliff near my house. I feel scared at night when I close my eyes and I see the badly hurt bodies of young committers”. He said, “I ask many times from myself that how an individual can hurt himself like this”. Four victims have commit suicide from cliff in Aliabad, which is now known as suicide point. And the people in this area are worried because too many people come there to commit suicide. According to the people of Aliabad, they have save more than hundreds of people from jumping from cliff, while in summers they must do duty.

Some of teenagers, according to parents use emerging issue of suicide as blackmailing. It is found that from increasing suicide, teenagers take benefit to fulfill their unwanted desires and wishes. Parents said that our sons usually blackmail us, it means boys use suicide as tool to fulfill their desire and few girls also do so. Because of increasing suicide in Hunza parents are likewise getting to be distinctly helpless before their children.
Suicide has also profound impact on the status, religion and region according to the people of Hunza. Family members of suicide committers argued that, it has badly effect our family status and reputation while some community member said that increasing suicide has great impact on reputation of our religion and region.

**Conclusion**

As discussed in introduction that people of Hunza consider suicide as taboo and do not want to talk about it but after going into field, it was found that now people talk about suicide to some extent. But they still relate their honor and status with suicide. They do not report cases and per police source from 2007 to 2016, five suicide cases were reported whereas in only central Hunza alone 15 teenagers had commit suicide. The most common cause of teenage suicide in Hunza are verbal/domestic violence, child-parent gap, lack of support, studies pressure exerted by parents and society, lack of trust by parents on their children’s, suicidal history, sacrifice or revenge. The emerging issue of teenage suicide increased the suicidal imagination among other teenagers. While people are also worried because their children’s blackmail them to commit suicide if they not fulfill their demand and people who live near suicide points are worried about having to save life of those go there to commit suicide.

It is find that there are no any significant differences between the causes behind boys and girls suicides, that some girls cases were also related to studies and lack of support as were some boys’ cases and some boys committed suicide due to shame and feeling helpless in love relation as well- something that is commonly associated exclusively with girl's suicides. Girls also used suicide to take revenge, to rebel, to sacrifice themselves, as well as to express helplessness. The boys seemed to show similar causes. Most of literature argued that those people commit suicide who are not closely affiliated with religion (Durkheim, Robin et al, 2009) but in this research those people had commit suicide who were closely affiliated with religion.

Furthermore, suicide has more effect on girls than boys. There is also change in suicide methods, in early times mostly commit suicide by jumping into river and by eating the residue of peach seeds but now jumping from high cliffs and hanging are the most common methods of suicides.
Bibliography


Bertolote, J. M., Fleischmann, A., De Leo, D., & Wasserman, D. 2003. Suicide and mental disorders: do we know enough?


Seaver, Patrick .2000. Suicide. The Furrow, 60, (3): 172-175


http://pamirtimes.net/2016/03/23/teen-suicides-what-parents-need-to-know/

http://pamirtimes.net/2015/12/10/honour-killing-cases-on-the-rise-in-gb-44-killed-in-2015/