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Exploring the Long-Term Psychological Impact of Childhood Abuse on Intimate Partner Violence Victims in Malaysia

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Abstract

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a widespread problem with devastating psychological consequences for its victims. However, there is a significant gap in research when it comes to understanding the psychological impact of IPV among individuals with a history of abusive childhood experiences, particularly in the Malaysian context. This qualitative study aims to address this gap by exploring the psychological impact of IPV on eight female informants who have experienced IPV and have a history of abusive childhood experiences. Through thematic analysis of interview data, this study sheds light on the psychological impact of IPV, including mental health deterioration and dysfunctional social beliefs. The study also reveals a new theme - the role of personal beliefs rooted in social, religious, and cultural norms in perpetuating abusive relationships. This finding has important implications for developing effective interventions and support systems that take into account the cultural context in which IPV occurs. Moreover, this study highlights the need for future research to focus on male victims of domestic violence, a significantly under-researched area. Overall, this study contributes to understanding of the psychological impact of IPV on individuals with a history of abusive childhood experiences in Malaysia. The insights gained from this study can inform the development of more effective interventions and support systems for IPV victims and contribute to a better understanding of this important issue on a global scale.

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Childhood Experience, Psychological Impact.

Introduction

Violence is defined as an act of individual physical force intended to cause harm to another individual (Jacquin, 2020). The impact of violence may affect the victim in terms of physical, psychological, or both. Violence can be distinguished from aggression, which is a more specific form of abusive behavior that can be physical, verbal, or passive in nature. Jacquin also highlights domestic violence, which occurs when family members, typically partners, engage in violent conduct, as one type of violent crime. Unfortunately, the world tends to focus more on homicide crime issues than other categories of violent crime, including domestic violence (Statista Research Department, 2021; Van Dijk et al., 2021). Despite the increasing cases of

domestic violence each year, this issue is not being addressed enough globally, and it continues to worsen over time. In Malaysia, domestic violence cases are on the rise, particularly in Kelantan's state, with 523 cases in 2020, up from 519 cases in 2019 (Rahimy et al., 2020; Siti Fatimah, 2021; Syaherah, 2021). It is crucial to take action now to prevent this trend from continuing in the coming years.

Shockingly, many cases of domestic violence are not reported due to various reasons (Faiz, 2019). One of the main reasons is that people tend to view domestic violence as a "private or family issue" since it is often perpetrated by a family member or intimate partner, leading them to turn a blind eye rather than report it to the authorities or offer help to the victims (Fisher, 2017). Furthermore, victims may continue to live in an abusive situation because they don't know how to get help or even that they are victims of domestic violence (especially child domestic violence victims). Some may hope that the abuse will end on its own, while others may be brainwashed into believing that they cannot live without their partner. In some cases, the partner may use the child as an excuse for why they need to maintain a "complete" family, and victims may be afraid that people won't believe them because their partner has a "good image" (Scott, 2021). Additionally, victims may not want their loved ones to be punished (Acierno et al., 2018).

Various reasons contribute to the increase in domestic violence cases worldwide and why many victims choose to remain silent. However, limited studies have explored the association between childhood abuse experiences and victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) who remain with a violent partner in Malaysia. This study aims to investigate the similarities in psychological impacts due to abusive childhood experiences among IPV victims and examine the association between these psychological impacts and the behavior and thoughts of IPV victims, which lead them to remain in an abusive marital relationship and to remain silent about it.

Methodology

Study Design

In this study, a qualitative research design was employed to explore the psychological impact similarities in terms of feelings and emotions due to abusive childhood experiences among victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and to investigate why victims stay with an abusive partner. Online interviews were conducted using a series of semi-structured questions. Qualitative research design was chosen as it can provide in-depth insight into the experiences of the informants (victims of IPV), highlighting the lack of previous research on this topic (Frost, 2011, p. 11). Additionally, using a semi-structured interview allowed informants to express their experiences in their own words, providing reliable and comparable qualitative data (Keller & Conradin, 2018). This approach is crucial in shedding light on the under-researched area of IPV and childhood abuse experiences, and may help to inform interventions and support for victims.

Sample

Eight informants were recruited from various social media platforms, such as Tik Tok, Instagram, and Facebook, as well as from Kelantan's Social Welfare Department, Kelantan, Malaysia, Atfal Jannah's Psychology and Rehabilitation Center, Selangor, Malaysia, and through recommendations from family members, friends, and lecturers. The reason for using numerous platforms is that the number of registered victims of Intimate Partner Violence

(IPV) from Kelantan's Social Welfare Department and Atfal Jannah's Psychology and Rehabilitation Center in Selangor, Malaysia expressed interest in participating in this study.

The research sample group consists of all Malay, female, and Muslim informants with a mean age of 35, ranging from 29 to 42 years old. They come from different states, with three informants each from Selangor, Penang, Sabah, Malacca, Perlis, and Kelantan. Four informants were divorced, two were still in a married relationship, one informant had remarried, and one had remarried with a different husband. The categories of IPV informants are either physical violence, psychological abuse, or economic violence. The majority of them had a childhood abuse experience (62.5%), while the rest did not (37.5%). The informants' demographic information is shown in Table 1. The mean duration of being an IPV victim among the informants is seven years, with the shortest period being four years and the longest period being 13 years.

Table 1

Table of Informants' Demographic Information

Informant	Age	State	Ethnicity	Religion	Gender	Marital Status	Period of time abused in marriage/ Categories of IPV	Categories of childhood abuse
R1	41	Penang	Malay	Muslim	Female	Divorce (10 years)	6 years / Psychological violence	Physical violence
R2	35	Selangor	Malay	Muslim	Female	Married	8 years / Psychological abuse	Psychological abuse
R3	33	Sabah	Malay	Muslim	Female	Divorce (3 years)	13 years / Physical violence	Neglect
R4	40	Melaka	Malay	Muslim	Female	Divorce (11 years)	4 years / Psychological abuse	Physical and Psychological abuse
R5	32	Selangor	Malay	Muslim	Female	Remarried (same husband)	4 years / Economic violence	Neglect
R6	40	Perlis	Malay	Muslim	Female	Divorce (3 months)	7 years / Economic violence	No experience of abuse
R7	32	Kelantan	Malay	Muslim	Female	Remarried (different husband)	5 years / Economic violence	No experience of abuse
R8	29	Selangor	Malay	Muslim	Female	Married	5 years / Physical, Psychological, and Economic violence	No experience of abuse

Measurement

In this study, a semi-structured questions were used as a guide for the online interview session, along with additional probing questions to obtain clear information. The semi-structured questions were designed to elicit information related to several key areas,

including (i) the participants' experiences of childhood abuse, (ii) the psychological impacts of such experiences on the victims of IPV, (iii) the nature of abusive experiences within their marital relationships, and (iv) the reasons why victims of IPV may choose to remain in abusive relationships.

Data Collection

Approval for this study was obtained from the ethics committee of the Malaysia Social Welfare Department prior the study was conducted. The online semi-structured interviews due to the movement restriction during the Covid19, the interviews lasting approximately 30 to 75 minutes, were conducted and audio-recorded, with verbatim transcription. The questions asked covered topics such as the informants' experiences of childhood abuse, the impact of abuse in intimate partner relationships, and the reasons for staying with an abusive partner. Additional probing questions were also asked to clarify the informants' answers. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, its procedures, the confidentiality of their personal information and responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Qualitative Research Data Thematic Analysis

The researchers used the thematic analysis method to analyze the data obtained from the eight informants who participated in the online interview session. Although Guest et al (2020) suggest that twelve participants are typically needed to achieve a higher degree of saturation, the current study was still considered valid as data saturation was achieved at a rate of over 50% (Guest et al., 2020). The themes developed were based on the informants' quotes regarding the similarities in psychological impact resulting from abusive childhood experiences among victims of IPV, as well as the reasons why victims choose to stay in abusive relationships.

Results

Theme 1: Mental Health

The study reveals that childhood abuse experiences have a notable influence on an individual's mental health, resulting in adverse emotions such as fear that can become deeply rooted and affect future relationships, including intimate partnerships, thereby contributing to victims of IPV staying in abusive relationships; highlighting the significant need to address mental health concerns among IPV victims in order to prevent and aid those affected by such violence.

R1 said, "...I'm afraid of her. I'm scared to do anything that might make my mother angry or provoke her. She can be very strict and intimidating, and her voice is always loud."

R3 said, "...I'm afraid of my father, so I just keep my feelings to myself and don't express them openly."

R4 said, "He is a very fierce person, unlike others, and this makes me very afraid of him."

The untreated fear and other negative emotions resulting from childhood abuse experienced by victims can have a profound effect on their future intimate relationships, leading them to

become trapped in a cycle of abuse when they become victims of IPV, with many choosing to stay in abusive relationships.

R1 said, *"However, my child was still very young at that time, so I was afraid to confront my mother's abusive behavior."*

R3 said, *"Maybe I'm scared of my father because of the way he acts, I'm not sure."*

Additionally, victims of IPV often blame themselves for the abuse they have experienced, which can contribute to them staying in the abusive relationship.

R1 said, *"I think what happened is my mistake. I believe that correcting things is the right approach, and I always try to think positively. Maybe it happened because I was not mature enough at that time, and I made a mistake..."*

R2 said, *"...sometimes I think it's because I was exhausted last night and didn't fulfill my duties as a wife. So, he thinks that as a man, if I do not fulfill my responsibilities as a wife, he will produce stress hormones, you know."*

R5 said, *"In my heart, I never thought that he is a bad person. I just told myself that he left me because I wasn't good enough. I didn't think I was a good wife because when I was pregnant, I didn't cook for him. That's what I'm thinking about."*

Theme 2: Social beliefs

The second theme of this study focuses on social beliefs, with three sub-themes related to the psychological impact on victims of IPV with abusive experience, including parenting stereotypes and learned helplessness. While learned helplessness is one of the sub-themes explaining why victims remain in abusive relationships, there are also other parenting stereotypes identified by R1 that contribute to abusive behaviors in Malaysian parenting.

R1 said, *"In the past, it was considered normal for parents to use physical punishment such as hitting, pinching, slapping, and even using objects like rubber pipes or hangers to discipline their children...This type of parenting style was not just limited to Malay culture. Even though I live in a Malay community, I have Chinese friends, and I agree that this is a common practice among parents in our society."*

R4 also agrees that abusive behavior is normalized as a parenting style in Malaysia, which leads to society ignoring the voices of abused children. R4 said, *"...this may be because society considers it a normal practice."*

Several informant-respondents shared that they had reported their abuse experiences, but the response they received from those around them created a perception that their accounts did not matter, leading to them suffering in silence. In this context, the researcher asked one of the respondents, "Ma'am, even if you tell people about your experiences, do you think there will be no change? Is that correct?" R4 responded, "Yes, true!"

R5 also had the same perception of this. R5 said, *"It has no effect. I feel like whatever I say there is nothing that will change. It's the best, I do not tell anyone about that! Yes, it's like that."*

This perception is likely to persist in the minds of victims and influence their future actions when facing similar situations, as evidenced by the experiences of R4 and R5.

R4 said, "It's not that no one knows about it. I have told my close friend. She suggested that we should have another child maybe that would make my husband change. I thought her idea was okay, but I was concerned about how having another child would change my relationship with my husband. She responded by saying that having another child would make our family an odd number and that it might change my husband's behavior".

R5 said, "I am the one who decided to disclose that information and set my own limitations on what I share with others. In my opinion, there is no need to share personal information if it doesn't elicit a response or if it serves no purpose". This negative perception not only can develop during childhood but also can develop during adulthood.

R1 said, "My mother taught me from a young age that it's okay if others do bad things to us, but we shouldn't seek revenge for their actions. Her teachings have greatly influenced my personality. Even though my ex-husband was a drug addict who physically abused me, I didn't feel the need to talk about what he had done. I felt that my actions wouldn't change anything since he would still continue to hit me. Although I knew I should go to the police station and report everything he had done, I didn't feel like it was necessary. However, I now realize that this thought was holding a grudge towards what happened, which is not okay."

R6 said, "I feel like I'm not necessarily angry, but to say that I'm not angry wouldn't be entirely true. However, I'm fine with it. I think the most important thing is that my child can stay with me."

R7 said, "It's like this, if he doesn't provide financial support for me, I don't have a problem with that. Because I don't want to cause any trouble, my salary is more than enough to cover rent, food, and anything else I need. There's no problem."

R8 said, "So, I thought that this was just a normal married life. I always thought that this was normal, that this is what marriage is supposed to look like."

Furthermore, some victims of IPV may choose to stay in the relationship with the belief that their partner will eventually change for the better, leading them to give their partners multiple opportunities to change, including second and third chances.

R1 said, "My brain tells me that he is not a bad person, he just messed up with my emotions. He loves me, so it's fine, I forgive him..."

R2 said, "...in my heart, I believe that it's fine. InshaAllah (if God wills), for what he has done, Allah will forgive him. He will be fine again as long as he continues to perform prayers..."

R4 said, "I thought that giving him a second chance would be enough, but it's not like that. I thought it was fine to tolerate his temper, but it's not."

R5 said, "I hope he changes."

R7 said, "I expect him to change..."

Taking into account the narrative above, it is evident that social beliefs have a significant impact on the victim's mindset. These beliefs have confined them to remain with their abusive partner, despite being subjected to abuse for an extended period.

Theme 3: Religious Belief

While the majority of Malaysians are Muslims and hold strong religious beliefs, the perception that their marriage is predestined and a test from God can sometimes prevent victims of IPV from seeking help and cause them to stay in abusive marriages. However, as people of faith, it is important to understand that seeking help is a way to improve their situation, and not simply accepting it as their fate and continuing to suffer in an abusive relationship.

R2 said, "... I believe that Allah (The Muslim's God) mated us because of my character, that I'm not a serious person..."

R7 said, "God already has His own plan. God's planning is already beautiful. It's the best plan for us. But, I keep questioning why God won't give us the right way. Five years ago, three years ago? Why do we need to wait for seven or eight years? Only then did God show us the right way?"

R8 said, "... So, at that moment, I realize, even though I had known it for a long time that I'm God's servant, and I need to believe in destiny, right?"

The respondents in the study expressed their belief that their abusive marriage was destined and beyond their control, and that they did not have the power to change it. However, they also emphasized the importance of self-sacrifice and obedience to God, and felt that enduring the abuse was a way to become better servants. Four of the respondents believed that their situation was a test from God.

R1 said, "... So, if our husband had bad behavior, we as a wife need to be patient, right?"

R2 said, "... What I can do is perform an Istikharah prayer (a type of prayer performed by Muslim people). The answer that I got is him, for me what happens it's a test."

R5 said, "At that moment, when we divorced, he was already with that woman. I'm fine with that, and I accept everything that happens to me. It's fine, maybe it is the right one for him"

R6 said, "Yes, I do. I told my friends about that. I told them many times, but they told me to let it go. If he knows his responsibility, he will do that. If he doesn't want to be responsible, just accept it. The most important thing is that God already had a plan for my child."

However, this misinterpretation of religious teachings can lead to a problematic response to violence within marriage. Additionally, there is a significant misunderstanding of religious beliefs among victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), as they may believe that wives must be obedient and not speak out against any actions of their husbands, or risk being labeled as a disobedient wife or "nusyuz" in Islamic terminology.

R8 said, "... It's normal for a wife to listen to their husband."

This misunderstanding has a significant impact on the victim's response to abuse and whether they choose to stay or leave the relationship. Figure 1 and Figure 2 propose outcome frameworks for the psychological effects of victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) with an abusive childhood experience and the reasoning behind why victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) choose to stay with a violent partner.

Figure 1

The framework for assessing the psychological effects on victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) with a history of childhood abuse based on data saturation.

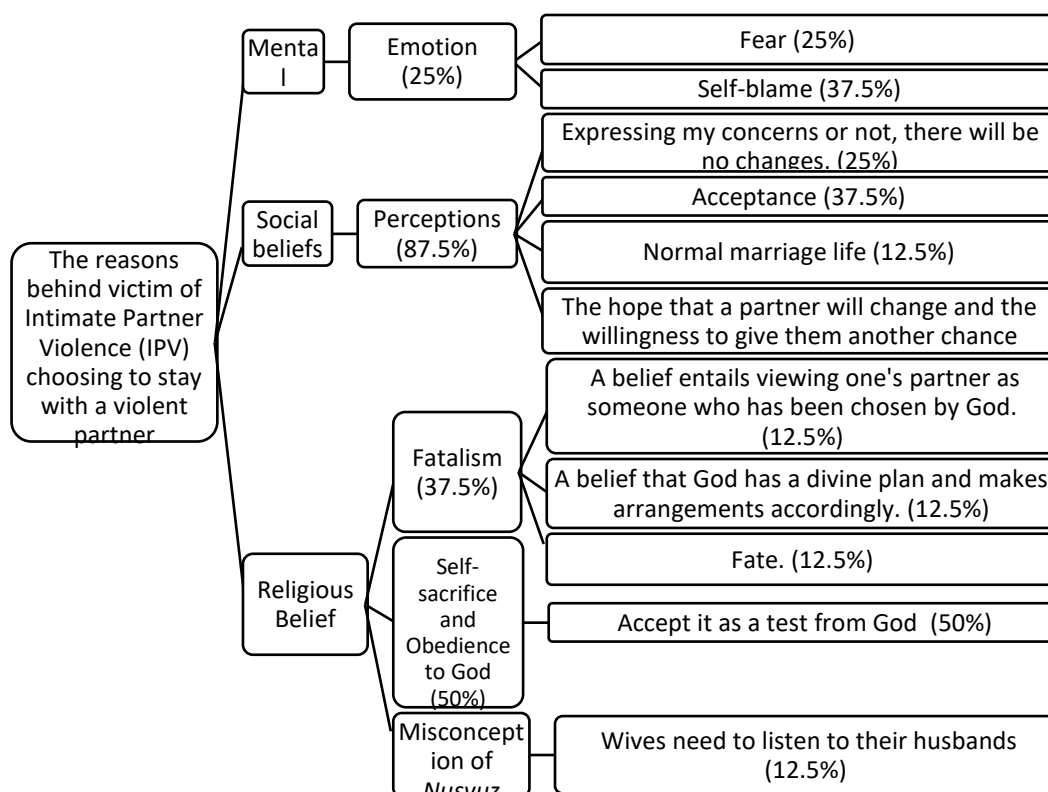
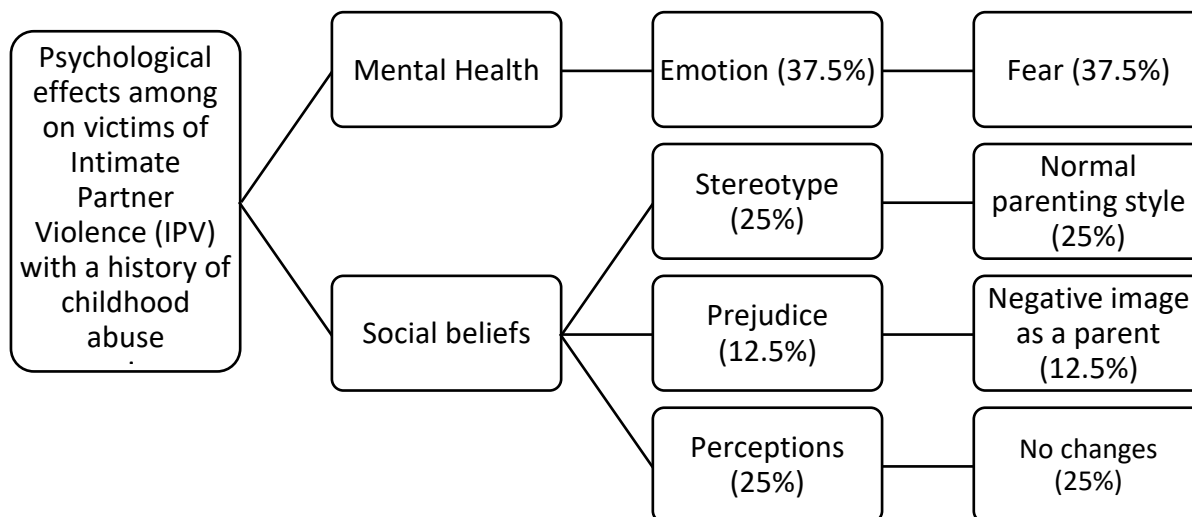


Figure 2 The framework for understanding the reasons behind victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) choosing to stay with a violent partner.

Discussion

This study identifies fear as the main psychological impact on victims of IPV who also experienced child abuse. The Cannon-Bard Theory suggests that encountering a stimulus, such as being beaten as a child, leads to fear, physical reactions like muscle tension, shaking, and sweating, as well as activation of the autonomic nervous system (Cherry, 2020). Negative emotions, including fear, can result from past experiences and may cause serious psychological issues like panic attacks, anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Zhao et al., 2019).

Sharma et al (2019) found that women victims of domestic violence exhibit worse mental health and suicidal tendencies than those who did not experience domestic violence. The study highlights the importance of seeking help to avoid repeating the cycle of abuse in future relationships. More research is needed to understand the psychological impact of IPV and to obtain reliable and valid results.

In addition, this study finds that victims of IPV stay in abusive relationships due to mental health, social beliefs, and religious belief. Victims hope that their abusive partners will change, so they give them chances to improve. Religious beliefs also play a role, as victims perceive the situation as a test of their faith in God, and some of them shows fatalism beliefs. Gezinski et al (2019); Houston-Kolnik et al (2018) show that religious leaders' response to domestic violence often includes faith-based resolutions that can mislead victims to believe that their situations are tests from God.

Additionally, the misconception of *nusyuz* (*Nusyuz* is a term used in Islamic law to refer to a wife's disobedience or rebellion towards her husband. It can include actions such as refusing to have sexual intercourse, leaving the marital home without permission, or not fulfilling her duties as a wife. In Islamic law, *nusyuz* is considered a serious offense and can lead to the dissolution of the marriage (Kamali, 2008). However, it is important to note that the concept of *nusyuz* is often interpreted and applied differently across different cultural and religious contexts). Thus, this may keep victims in abusive relationships due to a misunderstanding of Islamic teachings (Noordin, 2020).

In Malaysia, it is essential to consider cultural and religious beliefs when planning treatment for domestic violence victims. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of various interventions for victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) who have also experienced child abuse, particularly in addressing the psychological impacts of fear and trauma. Promoting emotional healing through interventions such as culturally sensitive trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (Latif et al., 2021), as well as perceived social support interventions could be beneficial (Ogbe et al., 2020). Perceived social support interventions have been shown to enhance psychological well-being and are cost-effective and easily accessible (Aw et al., 2023). Additionally, online interventions have shown promising outcomes (Mohamed et al., 2023). Further studies could explore the role of religion and cultural beliefs in the decision-making processes of IPV victims, as well as the effectiveness of faith-based approaches in addressing domestic violence. Such research can inform the development of culturally sensitive interventions for IPV victims in different cultural contexts. Additionally, conducting longitudinal studies can shed light on the long-term outcomes of IPV victims who have received different types of interventions.

Additionally, policymakers should address the issue of Islamic misunderstanding about the law of *nusyuz*, which leads some victims to develop learned helplessness and accept their fate. Due to their beliefs, they may feel destined to be abused and may not seek better understanding or help. One possible intervention could be to provide public talks and classes

to educate people about the true meaning of nusyuz and the rights of victims in abusive relationships. This could help to change societal attitudes towards IPV and empower victims to seek help and support.

Conclusion

In summary, this study sheds light on the psychological impact of intimate partner violence (IPV) on victims and the factors that influence their decision to remain in abusive relationships. The limited knowledge or misunderstanding of Islamic law, such as nusyuz, also contributes to victims staying in unhealthy relationships with their domestic partners. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations, such as challenges encountered in recruiting informants, and the need for future research to include male victims of domestic violence, as there is limited research on this population. The findings of this study can aid psychologists in developing effective psychological treatment plans for IPV victims. Additionally, the study highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive and comprehensive interventions that support IPV victims, enhance their safety, and empower them to seek help and break free from the cycle of abuse. Additionally, it is recommended that the Malaysian policymaker to address about the domestic violence for all soon-to-be-wed couples about the differences between the Islamic law about nusyuz and the right to voice out if the victims realize they have been abused.

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