Psychological Violence at the workplace – Impact on early career women in India

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Abstract:

This thesis seeks to understand the impact of psychological violence on the early-career (less than 5 years of experience) women in India, how they come to terms with it and what conditions – organizational and social, serve to amplify or diffuse the impact. In this study 27 women were interviewed about their experience of psychological violence at work. The interview focussed on understanding how the process of psychological violence unfolds in organizations and how it impacts them.

Findings showed that psychological violence has a very damaging impact on the victims – both psychologically and in terms of physical health. The impact on their productivity, engagement and confidence is significant and long-term, leading to the realization that organizations need to research and invest in this area. The experience of psychological violence stays alive in individual and collective memories, even after the actual experience has ended.

Finally, the experience of "psychological violence" emerges as an interplay between three dimensions - The **"backdrop"** comprising of the organizational culture as well as the family and social support ecosystem of the victim, the **"drama of violence"**; starting with the perpetrator (with a differential power status), the victim's view of what made them vulnerable to be targeted for the violence, the actual acts of violence, the role played by bystanders and the immediate impact on the victim; and the **"inner theatre"** of the victim; their locus of control and how they saw their role in the overall picture. The inner theatre of the victims emerges as the most powerful and fundamental dimension to the overall experience – because it is at this dimension that the experience is assimilated, internalized and resolutions for future action are made.

I. Keywords:

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Introduction:

In most explanations of the low female labour force participation rate in India, it is assumed that women leave to get married, take care of their families or because they don't need to work anymore.

However, during the course of my work in earlier organisations, whenever I looked at female attrition data of the organisation and benchmark data of multiple organisations, what struck me as odd, was that many of the women who were leaving their jobs, were single. And they were not leaving to get married, but to move to another organisation. Equally interesting were exit interview comments like, "mental harassment", "did not feel part of the team", "felt isolated by the rest of the team" etc – comments which were indicative of something else at work, something which felt like psychological harassment and violence.

This made me curious about the phenomenon of psychological violence and its impact – at an individual and organizational level. I was interested in knowing how this process unfolds, what causes it, how do the victims see themselves in the overall process and what is the overall impact on the employee's engagement and productivity. I was particularly interested in knowing more about this phenomenon, happening to the women in early career (< 5 years of experience) stage. My reason for focussing on this group, was a.) I believed that this group may already be experiencing societal pressure – to get married and have children, and b.) given their tenure, likely to be junior in their organization. Essentially, I wanted to see if these factors along with their gender, would influence their experience/s in any way.

Surprisingly, very little studies have been done to look at the impact of psychological violence as a possible variable in the equation, of female attrition in organisations. Further, despite growing evidence that connects psychological violence to increased mental stress and health risks, there are very little studies documenting this, especially in India.

While I have referred to prevalence studies that have assessed different phenomena such as workplace bullying, workplace harassment, mental harassment, workplace social stress etc, I have not used any prevalence studies to make any hypothesis about the extent of the problem in India.

Instead, I have focussed on trying to understand the "lived experiences" of these women. I followed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) technique with detailed narrative interviews of 27 young women working in a wide variety of organizations.

My objective was to use a an inclusive and yet specific definition of "psychological violence" to enable my respondents to focus on the relevant phenomena. I used the definition proposed by Laura Crawshaw (2009) in which she postulates that workplace psychological harassment can involve one or more perpetrators and targets at various levels of the organization, occur at various degrees of severity and frequency, be intentional or unintentional, and manifest in a wide variety of unacceptable behaviours in response to various precipitants and encompasses multiple forms of workplace abuse.

Key findings:

1. The experience of psychological violence stays alive in individual and collective memories, even after the settings have changed and after the actual experience has ended. The women continue to carry memories of the fear and anxieties into their subsequent work experiences as well. Further organizations or teams with a history of "psychological violence" continue to experience it long after the offender/s are removed from the context or the situation has improved – posing a significant challenge for organizations.

2. The experience of "psychological violence" emerges as an interplay between three dimensions

   a. The **"backdrop"** comprising of the organizational culture as well as the family and social support ecosystem of the victim, which calibrated the experience as acceptable or unacceptable and the extent of "negative value" assigned to the experiences. Emotional support and coping mechanisms (if present) were also assimilated at this level.

   b. The **"drama of violence"**; starting with the perpetrator (with a differential power status), what (according to the victims) marked them to be the target for the violence, the acts of violence by the perpetrator/s, the role played by bystanders and the immediate impact on the victim;

   c. The **"inner theatre"** of the victim; their locus of control, which in turn determines what role they see for themselves in the overall picture – which emerges as the most powerful and fundamental dimension to the overall experience. This determined not just how the respondents made sense of what happened to them but also determined their future stance.

The apathy of the organisation, lack of formal grievance handling mechanisms, fear of retaliation and the reluctance of stakeholders like HR, Middle Managers etc. to address the issue/s added to the sense of violence.

Research aims and objectives:

There is very little research available on the prevalence or on the phenomenon of psychological violence in the workplace in India, especially on women. Most existing studies in Indian workplaces that are related to women, tend to focus on the prevalence of gender bias (as evidenced by data on hiring, promotions, pay gap etc) and/or bemoan the social dictates according to which a woman is forced to choose between family and workplace and eventually leaves or finds herself at the lower end of the talent pipeline.

While this may be true, my experience – both as an early career woman as well as an HR Manager in large organizations, led me to believe that the day-to-day interactions, psychological validation (or lack of it) and sense of "safety" in the team have a bigger impact on the employee's engagement and ultimately decision to stay or leave the organization.

I also wondered if the initial set of experiences that an employee goes through, and the way she makes sense of it, creates an imprint on her self-esteem and confidence and therefore long-term career decisions and success.

I puzzled over the fact that we know so little about the subterranean day-to-day processes that happen in organizations.

This research aims to look at patterns of psychological violence prevalent in workplaces in India and how it might impact women at the entry level (< 5 years of experience) in the organization. The research specifically seeks to fill the following gaps in existing research – *1) What is the impact of psychological violence on women? 2) How does the process unfold and what leads the victims to the realization that what is happening to them is harassment? 3) What according to them, acts as the trigger/ what made the perpetrator/s do what they did? 4) What is the typical response of the organisation? 5) How did the victims make sense of what was happening?*

Literature review:

I have organised the available research on the concepts covered in my thesis into the following key themes:

- Impact of Psychological Violence
- Definition of psychological violence;
- Organisational settings provide for an environment in which violence becomes easy to enact and difficult to prove;
- Role of Gender in the overall power differential that seems consistent in all narratives of psychological violence;

Impact of Psychological Violence:

There is documented research to indicate that left untreated, and with prolonged exposure, cardiovascular stress-related diseases can result from pathophysiological changes to the body that transform emotional impact into damaging biological consequences. The effects of deliberate and systematically repetitive psychological oppression become evident as a collection of injuries that develop gradually in the individual. (Leymann 1990, 1996). The literature reports that the victims of long-term and continuous workplace bullying have decreased self-esteem and self-confidence and experience social isolation, social stigmatization, social maladaptation, anxiety, aggression, depression and symptoms related to depression (Chappell and Di Martino, 1998). Many victims of mobbing experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and some have even attempted suicide (Leymann 1990, 1996).

Carroll Brodsky's (1976) book "The Harassed Worker" identified the problem of internal violence and the price paid by victims. In 1998, Chappell and Di Martino spoke out about the importance of recognising that violence within the workplace is a costly problem for the organisation and the as well as individuals, in the organisation. In 2017, Emily Schindler, Janet Ransley and Danielle Reynald, provided a theoretical perspective of how psychological violence plays out in organizations, the extent of the problem and proposed a set of potential solutions to tackle this problem.

<u>Definition of Psychological Violence:</u>

One of the foundational difficulties associated with dealing with psychological violence is the relative invisibility of psychological abuse, which in turn poses a major challenge around seeing, labelling and measuring this phenomenon.

The topic has also been subject to narrow definitions as observed in Neall and Tuckey's (2014) review of 234 peer-reviewed published articles, in which multiple constructs and definitions were found. These included workplace bullying, workplace aggression, workplace harassment, workplace incivility and abusive supervision.

Arguments for and against an inclusive definition of this phenomenon have generated a lot of debate. Key international bodies such as the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and the US Department of Justice have adopted a more generic approach which focuses on the harm done by violence, whether physical or psychological.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2010 survey revealed that although terminology differed from nation to nation, it was appropriate to adopt the label of workplace violence or violence at work as an inclusive approach that incorporates these various labels. The US Department of Justice defines workplace violence as "any form of conduct that intentionally creates anxiety, fear and a climate of distrust in the workplace" (2003).

In 2009, in an attempt to create a more comprehensive yet precise nomenclature to define, label and thus manage this phenomenon, Laura Crawshaw proposed: *"In a descriptive nomenclature, workplace psychological harassment can involve one or more perpetrators and targets at various levels of the organization, occur at various degrees of severity and frequency, be intentional or unintentional, and manifest in a wide variety of unacceptable behaviours in response to various precipitants. Encompasses all forms of workplace abuse, including but not limited to discrimination, sexual harassment, workplace violence, unsafe working conditions, and so forth"*. Further she proposed that Workplace psychological harassment can include any of the following subtypes –

- Individual to individual or group,
- Group to individual or group,
- Organization to individual or group

For the purpose of my thesis, I have referred to this comprehensive definition in order to label and understand this phenomenon, in the lives of my respondents.

Organisational settings provide for an environment in which violence becomes easy to enact and difficult to prove:

As noted by Chappell and Di Martino (2006), workplace violence is a complex problem, with grounding in economic, industrial, cultural and organizational factors that are not simply the result of particular problematic individuals. As noted by Carter (2007), "violence is not only a historically shaped phenomenon, but it is linked with cultural views of justice and morality. The cultural framework establishes the narrative that enables the setting of boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate ways of being, applies the label of violence and determines actions deserving of being sanctioned, ignored or punished". Behaviours that might otherwise be viewed as violent may be tolerated or remain virtually invisible in everyday interactions (Stanko, 1994). As noted by Maxfield and Babbie (2015), "what we regard as moral and ethical in day to day life is not more than a matter of agreement among members of a group".

The relationship between organisational culture and risk for abusive behaviour was described in a related way by Sallin (2003) in a model which integrates both structure and process. In this model, enabling structures, motivating structures or incentives, and precipitating or triggering events interact to form the "perfect storm" in which psychological violence will occur.

Some key themes that stand out from the literature review are as follows:

1. *Organizational rules and power relationships can become a legitimising mechanism for abusive actions and the organization – a vector for tacitly authorised abuse.*

How the organisation views the configuration of power and power relationship/s influences the prevailing language depicting what is right and wrong and the eventual consequences of such actions. As argued by Hodson et al (2006), this becomes critical with respect to the legitimacy of the exercise of the authority and the way in which power relationships within organisations are able to facilitate or contain such violence. For example, the way an organisation indoctrinates employees to the demands of compliance with performance requirements can support behaviours and relationships that are fundamentally complicit in building and sustaining abusive relationships.

This becomes even more so in India with its complex and highly stratified social system of caste and sub-castes, language, religion and gender. These variables can combine to create an invisible but

powerful set of rules and influence the way "power" gets traded up and down the hierarchies and the impact this would have on the origin, acknowledgement and containment of psychological violence.

2. *Psychological violence is enabled and persists as a legacy of inaction as much as action.*

The failure to report abuse include a belief that nothing would be done by the organisation or that the target would be subject to retaliation by the actor or others (Namie and Ltugen-Sandvick, 2010). As with vicarious experiences of abuse, seeing how the organisation has failed to respond to victims of psychological violence communicates a clear message. Not only does this serve as a warning or lack of it to others, but also influences the likelihood of others offering social support to victims.

Silence makes those with power and authority to intervene complicit as passive accomplices.

The requirement to prove intent has been a powerful mechanism for excusing, or at least mitigating, responsibility for nonphysical violence and abuse. Unless the target has experienced ongoing or repeated abuse, often over some time period, it is not adequate to trigger an intervention or protection. In contrast, a single threat of potential physical assault is sufficient to generate an immediate and even punitive response. What is interesting that while organisations have shown a willingness to enact protections against physical and sexual harassment (though evidence suggests that the effectiveness of such protections still makes it very much a work in progress), the broader issue of psychological violence has remained contentious. Indeed, the cumulative effect in many environments has been the adoption of processes which revictimize the victims (Ashworth and Kriener, 2002).

3. *Psychological violence is a socially contagious process.*

Psychological violence also emerges as a socially contagious process, where in the absence of a "guardian", multiple players and bystanders participate in the process. Mobbing is a particular form of psychological violence in which multiple actors within the organisation collectively target the victim, in a concerted and in some cases, orchestrated way. Davenport (1999) provided a definition that demonstrates the nature of this violence: "A malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliations, general harassment, emotional abuse and/or terror. It is a "ganging up" by the leader(s) – organisation, superior, co-worker or subordinate – who rallies others into systematic and frequent "mob-like" behaviour". Again, mobbing is not about an individual psychopathology or individual conflict, but rather involves an overarching group and organisational dynamic that can be based upon informal alliances between more senior staff or as a consequence of influence with those of authority (Shallcross et al. 2013).

Role of Gender in the overall power differential that seems consistent in all narratives of psychological violence:

There is some research to suggest that power may facilitate aggression. For instance, adults who feel superior to others show relatively greater aggressive tendencies. The explanation provided is that aggressive behaviour is intended to reinforce one's high social rank and defend a favourable self-view (Baumeister, 2003). It also may be that, within a social group, high-power individuals have more opportunity and allowance for aggressive actions, relative to those whose behaviour is more constrained.

Gender seems to bestow a certain amount of power, given that men have been perceived as having more power, both in societal terms and in terms of their historical social status and position within organizations (Nicolson, 2015).

Which is why it was important for me to explore the literature for themes of gender-power relations and how it plays out in organizations.

Some key themes that stand out from the literature review on this theme, are as follows:

1. Gender stereotypes run deep (both in the minds of men and women)

Gender is a process through which social life is organized at the level of the individual, family and society (Nicolson, 2015). This means it is also crucial in the structure of organizations. It prescribes and defines the parameters of individual human experience in that women's lives are different from men's and the lens through which they themselves interpret their own experiences and operating constraints (Dangor et al. 1998).

In patriarchal cultures such as India, the social meanings given to anatomical symbols, operate in a deterministic way such that gender is seen as nothing but anatomy, and becomes almost synonymous with the destiny of the individual.

Furthermore, social ideas about gender and sexuality are constrained in the concept of female reproductive life. When we see a woman, we assume certain personality traits, certain behaviours, certain limits to her experience and most important we see her in some relation to motherhood rather than professional success (Nicolson, 1992, 1993).

Women's biological capacities to bear and feed children are presented in patriarchal societies as the determining features of what is "natural" and conversely what is "unnatural". Child-lessness and traits contrary to the nurturing role, such as aspiring to and achieving social power, are presented as unfeminine and somehow "damaging" to potential femininity (Ehrenreich and English, 1979).

2. We bring our "families" and the gender-power relationships in our families, to the workplace

Early socialization and family interactions and relationships impact on adult experiences, emotions and behaviour in work organizations (Eagly and Carli, 2003). In patriarchal cultures, such as India, gender relations are synonymous with power relations, in which men and male values have superordinate status over women and female values.

Furthermore, socialization into gender roles forms an integral part of the maintenance of the patriarchal power structure (Nicolson, 2015).

Thus, in a simplistic case, a girl might see the adult man/ father as head of the household. A boy might see his mother or sister or wife in need of protection (Dryden et al., 2009) or as someone who is inferior in hierarchy than himself.

There is also a powerful level at which impressions and family power relations experienced and witnessed in infancy and childhood remain with us, outside chronological development and beyond what we see as "rational" thinking and behaviour. A female manager, without thinking, might treat or experience her male boss as she would her older brother or father and so on. These relationships exist on an unconscious or atleast semi-conscious level and are replete with power and gender dimensions (Nicolson, 2012; Segal and Klein, 1973).

3. Seeing more women in the workplace (and disturbing the patriarchal order) may be invoking anxiety in the minds of men and women alike

Men are continuing to witness increased numbers of women entering their professional lives and these women are persisting in their careers despite challenges of motherhood, prevalent biases etc. While, working with women, who are in subordinate position may be congruent with/ even strengthen the conflation of "masculinity" and "career" within the patriarchal framework, the converse may not be true. (Dryden et al., 2009). It may be difficult for men to experience women as equal, and the pressure to recognize women as equals and/or superiors caused by mandatory inclusion policies and the characteristics of ambitious and capable women may seem like disturbance in the patriarchal order. This in turn may create extreme anxiety in many men and women.

I believe that this tension is likely to be felt, very keenly in India, with its long history of patriarchy and held firmly by social norms, beliefs and practices, deeply embedded in everyday life.

Methodology:

The objective of the study is to study the impact of the psychological violence in organizations on early-career women in India. Since very little research is available on this topic in India, I had the choice to go down the route of doing a prevalence study, which is to see – to what extent is psychological violence prevalent in organizations, at what levels, correlation with gender, types of organizations, demographic profiles etc.

However, I was keener to understand the "lived experience" of my respondents and how they saw and made sense of what happened to them. I was drawn to see if the "inner theatre" of the respondents had any impact on how they saw and interpreted what was happening. Hence, I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to collect, interpret and make sense of my findings.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with experience in its own terms. The philosopher Edmund Husserl famously urged phenomenologists to go "back to the things themselves". Thus, my research focussed more on "what was seen", "what was felt" and "how did it feel in the body" of my respondents rather than to fix their experience in predetermined categories.

I believe that following the IPA technique, gave me the following advantages:

1. It gave me the space to understand the phenomenon of psychological violence in multiple contours and from different perspectives, rather than simply a tick mark of whether or not it had occurred and a percentage to indicate the prevalence.

2. Experience is not just a single event but an infinite flow of "sensing" and "sense-making". It consists of both the actual occurrence as well becoming consciously aware of the occurrence and each time, the experience is revisited, a new layer of meaning is likely to emerge. At the most elemental level, my respondents were caught up in the everyday flow of experience. However, at some point in time, they stopped and paused to notice and take stock of what was happening to them. The meaning got further enhanced when they shared it with their friends, co-workers or family members. The discussion with their close friends or family members further coloured the experience as well as significantly shaped, how my respondents reacted to the experience. Thus, my respondents' experience of psychological violence comprised of different parts and were anchored at different points in time: 1) Once when they received the experience and 2) When they

realised that the label or language that could describe the experience was cloaked in words like "hostile", "stressful", anxiety-inducing" etc. and 3) If and when someone pointed out that this "anxiety- causing experience" was not a common or acceptable experience and that the respondent was being targeted or "marked" to receive the hostility.

IPA allowed me to see distinctly, the units of experience as well as the common meaning or narrative that my respondents were giving to what was happening to them.

3. The homogenous sampling required for the research topic meant that I was able to find multiple nuances of differences in the way the drama unfolded in the lives of each of my respondents. While there are common themes, which I have discussed in my findings, the exact process of how and why psychological violence got triggered, enacted, caused pain, got ignored, got amplified or diffused, was unique to each of my respondents' stories.

4. It was a deeply meaningful process for me. I was able to stand in the shoes of my respondents and understand what they were experiencing and feel on my skin, what they had felt. But I also had to ensure that in this process, I did not bring in my own biases, prejudices and memories of past experiences. I had to ensure that I was not colouring my respondent's experiences with my own experiences, before engaging in the interpretative process. Following the idiographic principle, I had to stay conscious of my participants individual perspectives. Engaging in this process, lent a very different meaning to my own experiences and the narrative that has emerged in my own consciousness.

Literature survey:

The theory and definitions around "psychological violence" formed the foundation of the thesis. The boundaries of what can be included as "psychological violence" and what must be left out, formed a large part of my reading. It was important to understand that not all negative interactions can be clubbed as "psychological violence". Because I was researching the impact of the phenomenon on a specific gender, I also referred to theory and research around "gender" and "violence" in relation with each other. The process was iterative. As I started researching the concept of violence, I encountered the concepts of "power" and "power differential" repeatedly. I then looked at how gender can be both a source of "power" and 'powerlessness". The "experience of violence" is very contextual and individual. Therefore, I read extensively on sociological trends and the concept of power and patriarchy in Modern India. I leveraged the INSEAD library resources, exploring a variety of journals, periodicals, abstracts and book excerpts. Also included were readings on the analysis methodology involving a study of phenomenological techniques.

Description of Research Setting:

Who ('early career women'):

The subjects of my thesis are 'early-career women'. I have defined 'early career women' as Indian women with less than 5 years of experience and who are engaged in a professional career in India. I do recognize that 1) Psychological violence can be experienced by men and women, of any age group, tenure and at any point in time of their career; and 2) Even within a specific gender, the experience of violence can happen at any point of time of one's career.

This study excludes men who have experience psychological violence as well as women who have experienced psychological violence after having many years of work experience. The rationale behind this exclusion is to focus attention on a small homogenous group with a few defining characteristics.

My respondents are of 1) a specific gender, 2) at a formative stage of their career and 3) of a specific age group. My hypothesis was that this group may be experiencing a certain amount of power deficit (from the point of view of gender and career stage) as well as be experiencing some amount of societal pressure, to either get married and/or have children and I wanted to illuminate the process of psychological violence as it unfolded in the working lives of this group of women in juxtaposition to what may be happening in their lives overall. I interviewed 27 young women, who acted as the 'informants/participants' for this research and have been referred to as R1, R2 … R27.

Sampling:

Since I was not interested in assessing prevalence, I decided to focus only on stories where there had been an experience of violence or an abusive interaction. Therefore, it would not have made sense to me to reach out to a random set of women, hoping that some of them might be able to shed light on what had happened. Further, there was practically no data available to guide me on where to look for women who had experienced psychological violence. Finally, I did not want to influence anyone within my own organization or those where I had friends to participate in the survey, because I did not want to have my participants feel obliged to participate.

I did this to ensure minimising of erroneous labelling of any negative experience as "psychological violence", simply because they were participating in a thesis around a specific theme. Instead I sought participants who 1) May have had an experience akin to psychological violence or at least something had happened that didn't feel right and 2) Would be able to choose of their free will, whether they would like to participate in my study.

So, I first reached out to five women on Linkedin, who met my initial criteria of age and experience and contacted them, explaining who I was, and the objectives of my thesis. I also included a very brief definition of psychological violence to help them decide whether or not, they would want to participate in my study. Only two women accepted to be part of my survey in the first instance. Since I wanted to know more stories, from a similar cohort, I asked my first two respondents if they knew someone who met my criteria of gender, age and experience; may have gone through a similar experience and who may be willing to share her story. Thus, the total sample of 27 respondents emerged as an iterative process and was almost entirely through the process of "snowballing", wherein each participant helped me to get more participants. Each of my respondents usually knew someone in their network who had gone through "a painful experience". However, almost 30% of those who were referred, either politely declined my invitation or did not finalize an actual time to speak. I continued to speak to the respondents that were referred to me by other participants and followed the stories, till I felt that the patterns were beginning to emerge, and I was able to see a narrative to the patterns. Hence when I finished 27 interviews and transcripts, I decided to start the process of data analysis.

Demographics:

I focused on individuals working in India, so I could focus on variations that emerged from a small homogenous group.

The 27 participants who agreed to be part of my thesis worked across 27 different organisations which were a blend of:
- Indian operations of multinational companies (more than 10 years of operations in India)
- Government agencies (Research facilities directly or indirectly associated with the government and more than 25 years of operations
- NGOs (Funded and recognised by Indian and global agencies)
- Indian startups (more than 7 years of operations)
- Indian organizations (more than 25 years of existence)

Education:

- Bachelor of Engineering/ Technology -12
- MBA – 12
- Graduate - 3

Age & Gender: Participants interviewed were between 24 - 30 years of age. All were women.

Proximity: Of the 27 participants, about 5 were acquaintances and the remaining 22 were completely unknown to me.

Preparation:

In preparation for the interviews, I explored theoretical concepts related to psychological violence, gender, power, patriarchy, narrative analysis and phenomenological analysis, among others. I started off with creating a basic definition for the concepts of "psychological violence", "impact of psychological violence" and a lot of concepts that would get discussed during the interviews. I looked through literature review to see where impact of violence had been researched. This helped me a lot to prepare myself for the fact that this could potentially be an emotionally charged process and I needed to prepare to "walk in the shoes of my participants" and yet have a "measure of objectivity" to be able to create a narrative for what may be happening in organizations, and to see how the process was unfolding for my participants. I also had to ensure that given the sensitivity of the topic, I had to allow my participants the right to withdraw from the process up to the point of data analysis. For interview questions, I planned on starting with open-ended questions and get to know the story and had planned on a set of questions, to be asked, if required. This will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Data collection:

My primary source of data for the thesis was based on 27 informant interviews.

My objective was to evoke as rich, detailed and participant-centric perspective of what had happened, as I could. I relied on in-depth interviews to achieve this. This gave me the flexibility to follow the stories, in the direction that my participants wanted to take them. I was able to dialogue with them to understand, from their perspective "what they experienced" as well as "why they experienced what they experienced" and a nuanced understanding of "what was the experience" and "what was the impact of the experience".

In addition to the detailed literature research on the concepts of psychological violence, gender, power and patriarchy etc.; I had informal conversations with professionals – male and female and personal acquaintances who were able to give me their insights and views. I was also able to use my discussions with my EMC classmates, colleagues and friends, on their experience of psychological violence at the workplace, did they see this as a relevant issue. Did they see this as a power game or a gendered game or a combination of both? This enabled me to be open to the fact that the perception of psychological violence is a very contextual thing and thus I had to understand my participant's "experience" in their "context" to be able to make sense of what was happening.

Four phases of the interviews (Jovchelovitch, Bauer, 2000):

Phase 1: Initiation:

As discussed earlier, my way of requesting for respondents to my thesis was to reach out to the first few participants and then having them connect me with someone who they knew in their network, and who would be willing to share their story. Once I received a go-ahead, I would send the participants an email with a formal invite letter (Annexure 1). I then set up an initial introductory conversation to introduce myself, the EMC program, my topic and thanked them for their willingness to share their stories with me as well as making time for me. I explained the narrative inquiry process and let them know that first part of the interview would be an open-ended narrative from their side, then I might ask a few follow-up questions. I told them that given the sensitive nature of the discussion, they should stop if they felt uncomfortable at any point in time during the interview. I also gave them the choice to not answer any specific question, if that made them uncomfortable. I also explained that they had the option to withdraw upto a month after their interview, so that I would not include the same in my analysis (eventually none of my participants requested for a withdrawal). Finally, I explained to my respondents that they should think of this as an informal dialogue and not a structured interview.

Phase 2: Main narration:

I did all interviews telephonically as that was more comfortable for my respondents. It worked out as an advantage for me as I felt that concentrating on just the voice and verbal expressions, allowed me to listen in a way that I may not have been able to, had I been face to face with my respondents. All interviews were using detailed notes. Most interviews took anywhere between an hour to 90 minutes, which I then followed up for a few more minutes, when I had specific questions.

Before the narrative, I opened the discussion with introducing a broad definition of psychological violence and then proceeded to ask, "Have you ever experienced or seen this in any of your workplace/s and if yes can you tell me what happened?" Typically, this prompted my respondents to start their narrative. Other than verbal nods and encouragement, or asking clarifying questions when I needed to, I did not speak during the narrative. Usually at some point my respondents would say – "That's my story. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have".

Phase 3: Questioning phase:

Once my respondents came to the end of their narrative, I opened up the questioning phase. Sometimes during the course of the narrative, itself, my respondents would have answered the questions of "what they were feeling". If that didn't happen, then I would typically start my questions with "How did that make you feel?". One of the surprising things I found in the first few interviews, is that often my respondents would accompany their descriptions of feelings with a phrase of physical sensation. "It felt like a slap on my face", or "I could feel my neck and back muscles tensing up", or "It felt like my head was throbbing". I therefore decided to keep some space in my future interviews in case my respondents wanted to explain their feelings in terms of "emotions" as well as "physical sensations".

To give further meaning to the narrative, I used the 3-dimensional narrative inquiry model to add specifics to the narrative (Clandinin, 2013).

Depending on the flow of the narrative, some of the indicative questions I asked:

Personal and social terms (interaction/social) –
1. How did others react when this happened?
2. Did you see this happening with others in your workplace?
3. Did you share what happened with you with others at the workplace?
4. Did you share any of what happened, with your friends?
5. Did you talk about this with your family?

Past, present and future (continuity/temporality) –
1. What did you feel at various points when this happened?
2. Did you think of doing something different?
3. What happened after that?

Notion of place (situation/place) -

1. Where did this happen?
2. What was it like, being there, at that time?
3. What did it feel like when you were there?

Phase 4: Concluding talk:

This was the most important phase of the overall process, as this was the phase where my respondents were making sense of the overall phenomenon. This was a "reflective space" in which they were able to observe themselves as an actor in the overall drama of what happened. The small talk and casual comments that my respondents made, both before and after my interview, generated deeper associative unconscious elements which I picked up. Some of these associative elements, biases and prejudices were mine. Picking up these finer elements and nuances, helped me to detail my analysis as well as during the theme-generation phase.

The existing literature on analysis in IPA has not prescribed a single method for working with the data. In fact, most published material is characterized by flexibility in matters of analytic development. I have tried to stay true to IPA's essence which is, its analytic focus – which in this case is *my attempt to make sense of my respondents' attempts to make sense of their experience.*

Data Analysis:

As I started to engage with the process of data analysis, I tried to adhere to:

1. A set of common processes (moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative);
2. Commitment to the participants' point of view;
3. Focus on personal meaning-making

I went through the following steps to analyse the huge data that I was able to generate through the 27 interviews and transcripts:

Step 1: Reading multiple times:

I started by immersing myself in the transcripts one by one. I read them multiple times, including my notes on what I was thinking and feeling when they were speaking. This helped me to recreate the interviews and, in a way, this process generated some of the most striking initial observations.

Step 2: Initial notings:

In this step I examined semantic content and language used in each of the interview, at a very exploratory level. I noted down, whatever seemed like a theme and made notes as I went over each and every interview transcript. I looked for *descriptive* comments (how were the respondents describing what was happening), *linguistic* comments (specific words or language being used by the respondents) and *conceptual* comments (respondents' explanations and explorations for the causal reasons of the various phenomena).

Step 3: Developing emergent themes:

This step involved moving from the transcript to re-organize the data and pick up phrases which according to me, represented the underlying essence of what I felt was happening. In this step, I reflected not just on what the respondents were saying but also how I was able to interpret what was happening. The emergent themes as derived from the initial notings are summarised in (**Figure 1: Notings to Primary Themes).** I also found a set of themes which became emergent when I was reading the sections of the transcripts where my respondents were speaking about what happened to them in the context of who they were (**Figure 2: Primary Themes – Valence of the victims plays a role).**
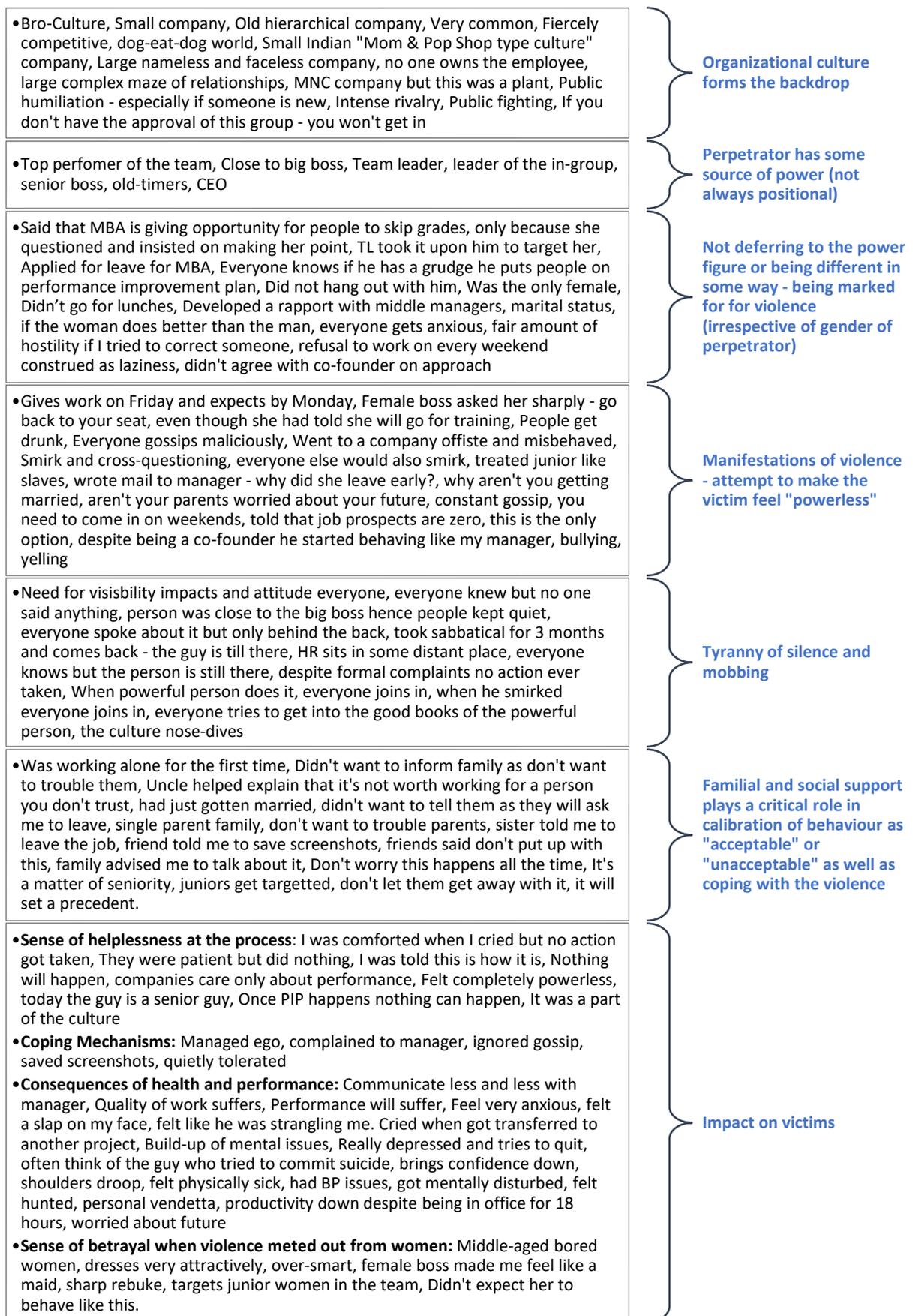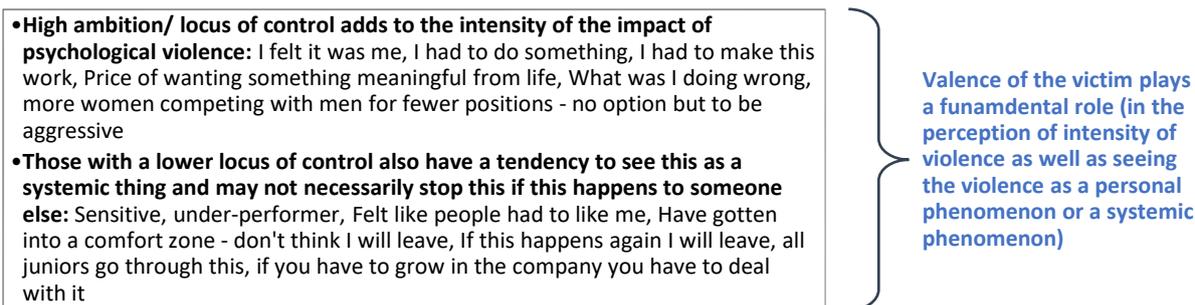
- Bro-Culture, Small company, Old hierarchical company, Very common, Fiercely competitive, dog-eat-dog world, Small Indian "Mom & Pop Shop type culture" company, Large nameless and faceless company, no one owns the employee, large complex maze of relationships, MNC company but this was a plant, Public humiliation - especially if someone is new, Intense rivalry, Public fighting, If you don't have the approval of this group - you won't get in

Organizational culture forms the backdrop

- Top perfomer of the team, Close to big boss, Team leader, leader of the in-group, senior boss, old-timers, CEO

Perpetrator has some source of power (not always positional)

- Said that MBA is giving opportunity for people to skip grades, only because she questioned and insisted on making her point, TL took it upon him to target her, Applied for leave for MBA, Everyone knows if he has a grudge he puts people on performance improvement plan, Did not hang out with him, Was the only female, Didn't go for lunches, Developed a rapport with middle managers, marital status, if the woman does better than the man, everyone gets anxious, fair amount of hostility if I tried to correct someone, refusal to work on every weekend construed as laziness, didn't agree with co-founder on approach

Not deferring to the power figure or being different in some way - being marked for for violence (irrespective of gender of perpetrator)

- Gives work on Friday and expects by Monday, Female boss asked her sharply - go back to your seat, even though she had told she will go for training, People get drunk, Everyone gossips maliciously, Went to a company offiste and misbehaved, Smirk and cross-questioning, everyone else would also smirk, treated junior like slaves, wrote mail to manager - why did she leave early?, why aren't you getting married, aren't your parents worried about your future, constant gossip, you need to come in on weekends, told that job prospects are zero, this is the only option, despite being a co-founder he started behaving like my manager, bullying, yelling

Manifestations of violence - attempt to make the victim feel "powerless"

- Need for visisbility impacts and attitude everyone, everyone knew but no one said anything, person was close to the big boss hence people kept quiet, everyone spoke about it but only behind the back, took sabbatical for 3 months and comes back - the guy is till there, HR sits in some distant place, everyone knows but the person is still there, despite formal complaints no action ever taken, When powerful person does it, everyone joins in, when he smirked everyone joins in, everyone tries to get into the good books of the powerful person, the culture nose-dives

Tyranny of silence and mobbing

- Was working alone for the first time, Didn't want to inform family as don't want to trouble them, Uncle helped explain that it's not worth working for a person you don't trust, had just gotten married, didn't want to tell them as they will ask me to leave, single parent family, don't want to trouble parents, sister told me to leave the job, friend told me to save screenshots, friends said don't put up with this, family advised me to talk about it, Don't worry this happens all the time, It's a matter of seniority, juniors get targetted, don't let them get away with it, it will set a precedent.

Familial and social support plays a critical role in calibration of behaviour as "acceptable" or "unacceptable" as well as coping with the violence

- **Sense of helplessness at the process**: I was comforted when I cried but no action got taken, They were patient but did nothing, I was told this is how it is, Nothing will happen, companies care only about performance, Felt completely powerless, today the guy is a senior guy, Once PIP happens nothing can happen, It was a part of the culture
- **Coping Mechanisms:** Managed ego, complained to manager, ignored gossip, saved screenshots, quietly tolerated
- **Consequences of health and performance:** Communicate less and less with manager, Quality of work suffers, Performance will suffer, Feel very anxious, felt a slap on my face, felt like he was strangling me. Cried when got transferred to another project, Build-up of mental issues, Really depressed and tries to quit, often think of the guy who tried to commit suicide, brings confidence down, shoulders droop, felt physically sick, had BP issues, got mentally disturbed, felt hunted, personal vendetta, productivity down despite being in office for 18 hours, worried about future
- **Sense of betrayal when violence meted out from women:** Middle-aged bored women, dresses very attractively, over-smart, female boss made me feel like a maid, sharp rebuke, targets junior women in the team, Didn't expect her to behave like this.

Impact on victims

Figure 1: Notings to Primary Themes

- **High ambition/ locus of control adds to the intensity of the impact of psychological violence:** I felt it was me, I had to do something, I had to make this work, Price of wanting something meaningful from life, What was I doing wrong, more women competing with men for fewer positions - no option but to be aggressive
- **Those with a lower locus of control also have a tendency to see this as a systemic thing and may not necessarily stop this if this happens to someone else:** Sensitive, under-performer, Felt like people had to like me, Have gotten into a comfort zone - don't think I will leave, If this happens again I will leave, all juniors go through this, if you have to grow in the company you have to deal with it

Valence of the victim plays a funamdental role (in the perception of intensity of violence as well as seeing the violence as a personal phenomenon or a systemic phenomenon)

Figure 2: Primary Themes – Valence of the victims plays a fundamental role

Identifying recurrent themes

27 is a fairly large sample (by standards of IPA research). Hence it was important for me to balance idiographic focus with finding themes prevalent for the larger group. So, I used recurrence to check if the emergent theme was prevalent for atleast half of the cases. I have presented this in **Figure 3: Recurrence of themes**.

EMERGENT THEMES	PERCENTAGE OF RECURRENCE (% out of a total of 27)
Organizational culture as a backdrop	92.6% (present in 25 cases)
Perpetrator has a source of power (not always positional)	70.4% (present in 19 cases)
Not deferring to the powerful figure or being different in some way – marking them as a "potential target"	77.8% (present in 20 cases)
Manifestation of violence – attempt to make the victim powerless in some way	100% (present in 27 cases)
Tyranny of silence and/or mobbing	55.6%5 (present in 15 cases)
Familial and social support impacts 1) interpretation of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and 2) coping with the violence	81.5% (present in 22 cases)
Impact on victims	100% of the victims were impacted in terms of health and performance – however the coping mechanisms as well as reaction to gender of perpetrator varied.

Figure 3: Recurrence of themes

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

In this step, my attempt was to look at the way in which the overall drama of the psychological violence played out in organisations. In this step, I started with *a process of abstraction* – in a very basic sense, this was about identifying patterns between emergent themes and developing a "super-ordinate" theme. I also *contextualised* the emergent themes as narrative elements within the analysis of my respondents' stories. Because my transcript essentially followed the flow of the respondents' narrative, I was able to highlight constellations of emergent themes which related to particular narrative moments (*this happened and then this is how I felt)*. Finally, I looked at *the function* of the emergent themes within the transcripts. I started this by cutting out all the emergent themes printed on paper and then trying to see a "big picture". I reflected on the interplay of the meanings illustrated by organizing them as **causal** or **impact** as well as by exploring the multiple pathways that emerged.

Step 5: Searching for patterns across cases

While each one of my participants' stories was unique, when I kept moving through each of the respondents' transcripts, certain patterns became illuminated by the time I finished going through all the transcripts. I found this process very creative and the visual that came to my mind was that of "improv theatre". Each "act" had certain "fixed elements" or "props" which formed the backdrop of every story and then there were elements of "unique co-created scenes" where the props, the actors and even the audience (bystanders, friends and family members) of the respondents interacted and the "drama of violence" emerged.

Findings:

As I put all my patterns and themes together, I started off by asking the questions, that I had set out with in the beginning – "*How does the process of psychological violence unfold in organizations? What is the impact on early-career women? How do they deal with it? Does their experience inside the organization get shaped or amplified in juxtaposition to their family and social ecosystem?*

The process of applying a lens of "night vision" to the analysis of the narratives, led me to two insights:

1. Human experience is a never-ending flow of a) anticipating an experience, b) actually living through it and c) through infinite reminiscence/s of the experience. And new meaning emerges each time, the experience is remembered or "re-lived". This was my most fundamental realisation as I read my respondents' stories. These women who had lived through an experience of psychological violence, discovered new layers to the dimension of violence long after the experience was over – when they saw it happening to others, when they experienced it themselves, discussed it with their families and friends, when they considered new roles and even when they were sharing their stories with me. Even remembering the experience was akin to living through it. I also came to the conclusion, that organizations or teams with a history of "psychological violence" continue to experience some form of the violence, long after the offender/s are removed from the context or the situation has improved through the "ghosts of memories" that live on in the collective organizational memory. This poses an additional challenge for organizations who may be trying to build a culture of positive employee commitment; as the problem will not go away through expulsions or short-term initiatives.

2. Psychological violence is not a linear process in which the perpetrator/s says or does x and the victim experiences y. My respondents lived-experiences reveal that "psychological violence" emerged as an interplay between three dimensions **(Figure 4: Psychological Violence – the three dimensions of experience)**:

    d. The **"backdrop"** which is created by the *organizational culture* as well as the *family and social support ecosystem of the victim*; it is at this level that the victim sees what is happening as typical or atypical and the extent of "negative meaning" of what is

happening at the experience level – gets derived only in juxtaposition to the backdrop.

e. The **"drama of violence"**; starting with the *perpetrator (who always has a differential power status - positional or otherwise), what (according to the victims) made them the target for the violence*, the *acts of violence* by the perpetrator, the *tyranny of silence and/or bobbing my bystanders* and the *immediate impact on the victim*;

f. The **"inner theatre"** of the victim; their *valence to personalise what is happening to them* and their *locus of control*, which in turn determines what role they see for themselves in the overall picture. I would argue that this is the most powerful and fundamental dimension to the overall experience as this determined not just how my respondents made sense of what happened to them but also what stance they are likely to take if they encounter this again or see this happening to someone else.

In the next few pages, I have explained each of the dimensions, the emergent themes that form part of the dimensions and the overall interplay between them.

BACKDROP

Organizational culture - a backdrop to psychological violence

Familial and social support: 1) Helping to calibrate behaviour as "acceptable" or "unacceptable" and 2) Coping with the violence

THE DRAMA OF VIOLENCE

Perpetrator has a power differential

Being marked for violence - *Not deferring to the power figure* or *Being different in some way*

Manifestation of violence - *Cloaked in what's deemed as "acceptable"* and *Aimed at making the victim feel "powerless"*

Tyranny of silence/ Mobbing

Impact on victims - Sense of helplessness, health consequences, impact on performance, left with a sense of betrayal

THE "INNER THEATRE" (How my respondents saw their own role in the overall experience)

Valence of the victim

High locus of control

Intensely impacted by the violence - tendency to blame self "It must be me"

Low locus of control

Able to see it as a "systemic" phenomenon - coping mechanism - "Nothing I can do"

Figure 4: Psychological Violence – the three dimensions of experience

- **Organizational Culture forms a part of the backdrop:**

One of the first things I noticed about my respondents' experiences is the way they described the context in which they were, when they experienced a sense of psychological harm.

> The company culture was only about performance with no care for employees… My manager was part of a large, complex matrix … there were so many labyrinths of reporting relationship/s that no one really owned an employee …. (R1), It was a bro-culture …. A bunch of aggressive, testosterone-fuelled people …. Intense rivalry… common to go through public humiliation in team meetings … (R2), Such was the culture in the organisation … every senior person was like that … juniors were being treated as slaves (R6), People talked behind her back … despite formal complaints …no action ever take (R20), HR sits in a distant place and even though I tried to complain … HR told me, if it's not sexual harassment, don't take it to heart … (R15), Though it was a large FMCG, I was in a factory … driven by men … shop-floor colleagues used to treat us like temporary …. Factory manager told me … we hire girls to brighten up the atmosphere ... don't try to do anything more than that … repeatedly blocked attempts to get transfer to a branch … everyone said this was the common practice … despite complaints by previous MBA batches … no action ever taken (R22) … etc

Organizational culture has been defined as "a pattern of basic assumptions, discovered or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore to be taught to new members entering the organization as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1990). This definition suggests that organizational culture is the result of deliberate action, it is also the case that organizational culture can be passively forged through the absence of action. In fact, organizational leadership can legitimize and institutionalize bullying and abuse through their passivity in responding to violations and this too can very powerfully forge organizational culture and norms (Liefooghe & Davey, 2001).

In the course of my respondents' experiences, the absence of formal whistleblowing or reporting policies, actual effectiveness of these policies and processes and the organization's track record in dealing with these and related incidents prove to directly impact the probability of such incidents being repeated as well as the sense of hopelessness that my respondents experienced with respect to the likelihood of any redressal.

More importantly, from the point of view of my respondents, the prevailing organizational culture and settings formed the background against which they labelled and viewed their experiences.

- **Family and social support ecosystem of the victim:**

If the experience was being created in the workplace, it was being labelled as "unacceptable" or "acceptable" by the family and social context of the respondents. The messaging provided by the family and friends emerged as a crucial factor in creating the foreground against which behaviours either got the nomenclature of "Not acceptable. You need to do something about this" or "This is a part of life. Don't feel so bad."

> My father asked me to join the government company … more benefits … he said … atleast there is job security …my friends told me this happens to all juniors … if you feel so bad how will you survive (R2), I was working alone in a new city for the first time … didn't want to tell family what was happening … they would ask me to quit for sure … (R3), My sister told me to save the screenshots … she said I should complain … that's when I thought enough is enough (R5), My uncle told me … why would you work in a place where there is no trust … (R7) I don't want my family to ever know about this … it was difficult to convince them to let me work…if they find out … I will be forced to quit … (R9), Had just got married … it was so tough managing in-laws' expectations and my boss insisted that I come every weekend … my husband told me … it's insane to expect that the team members should work each and every weekend (R11), Everyone told me this is not ok and I should not put up with this rubbish behaviour … (R16), Single-parent family … as it is there is too much pressure at home … didn't want to burden anyone with what's happening at work… (R21) … etc.

I had an interesting insight that the *most damaging impact on the respondents seemed to occur when there was incongruence between what the respondents were feeling and how their social context was labelling it or asking them to react to it.*

> In front of everyone she asked me to pick up the bag … I could feel my face turning red and everyone looking at me as I walked up to my seat … but the next day my friends said … Its's ok … all juniors go through this… I thought I don't see you going through it (R3), I was having BP issues and feeling so fatigued … my brother told me … you are over-sensitive … (R8), I was having regular migraines…but my sister told me … this is nothing … get used to it …(R17), Single-parent family … as it is there is too much pressure at home … didn't want to burden anyone with what's happening at work… my relatives told me if you want better than this, you should think of moving outside India (R21) … etc.

My respondents were not just living through their experiences but also seeing it through the lens provided by their family and social support system.

Social support or "the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us" (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983, p. 127). In the course of my thesis, this emerged as a critical factor in both 1) calibrating of behaviours as "psychological violence" or "routine behaviours" and 2) moderating the impact of psychological violence for the respondents.

When I first started doing my research, I had somehow visualised the process of violence as a linear process – starting with a trigger and ending with an impact. However, as I reflected on the experiences of my respondents, I find that its is a complex process and it is difficult to pinpoint a starting point and an ending point to the process. The image I had was that of a series of reactants moving cyclically and having an escalating impact on the overall process. I have tried to explain each discrete reactant in the following pages:

1. **Perpetrator has some source of power (though not always positional):**

In the reflections of my respondents, the perpetrator or the initiator of the violence always had some source of power over them. In many cases, this source came from formal seniority – direct manager or supervisor or a senior in the organization or informal (better performer, had more years of experience, related to the promoter, allusion to a "authority figure" etc.). Gender also emerged as a source of power. Everything else being equal my respondents felt that being a minority group, or being a woman, made them the target. The source of power seemed to accord some immunity to the perpetrator/s from the consequences of their actions.

> She was a star performer … (R1), This was the powerful group … the "in-group" … you had to have the approval of this group to survive … (R3), He was in the good books of the promoter … I think he was a relative … had helped him in a crisis (R5), This guy was in an indispensable position to the manager …. His skills were critical to the project at that stage …(R8), He was the CEO and quite old…and after making the comment he would say … "I am like your father" (R12), She was hired by the director … no one could say anything to her (R16), He was a senior member of the team … the default boss (R20), If you are the only woman in the group, what else can you expect (R22) etc.

2. **What marked them for being the target for violence: a) Not deferring to or challenging the power figure (intentionally or unintentionally) or b) Being different in some way**

During my interviews when I asked the question, "why do you think he/she/they behaved in this way with you?", most of my respondents seemed to believe that they were "targeted" or "marked" for the violence either because 1) they challenged the power figure in some way or 2) they were different from the rest of the group in some way.

> I was not as chatty as the rest… (R1), I could not speak like them … (R2), I didn't go out for lunches like the rest of them (R4), I didn't dress like them …(R6), I used to volunteer for extra projects (R7), I decided to enrol myself

in a learning program (R9), I was single and not quite pro marriage (R10) …, I started doing quite well, this made the men in my team really anxious (16)… etc.

In most cases they were not really challenging the power figure but threatening the existing power status by doing really well, volunteering for extra work etc, in other words, becoming more "visible".

Gender definitely emerges as a source of "powerlessness" and adds to the power differential that seemed to be an important factor in ensuring the continuance of violence.

> He thought just because I am a girl I can't get a better job (R4), …I was the only girl in my team (R13)…, They could not even think of giving this role to a girl (R22), The seniors would not even look at me, they would look at the guy accompanying me (R25).

3. Manifestation of violence: 1) Cloaked in what's deemed as "acceptable" and 2) Aimed at making the victim feel "powerless"

In the narratives of my respondents, the manifestation of "psychological violence" ranged from the overt to the very subtle and covert. It included - *threats to professional status* (e.g. public or professional humiliation, and accusations of lack of effort); *threats to personal standing* (e.g. sarcastic remarks, intimidation, insulting reference to marital status); *isolation* (e.g. preventing access to opportunities, social isolation, and withholding information); *overwork* (e.g. undue pressure, impossible deadlines and unnecessary disruptions); and *destabilization* (e.g. removal of responsibility, repeated reminders of blunders).

All the actions that were construed as "psychological violence" were seen as cloaked in contextually acceptable behaviours. It included but was not limited to what can be defined as sexual harassment. It included deliberate actions as well as acts of omission. What was clear though that all the actions were intended to make the victim feel powerless in some way.

> She ordered me to go back to my seat in front of everyone … (R1), She told me "doesn't your manager teach you anything?" … (R2), He told me "you won't get a job anywhere else" (R3), They were polite to me but would keep quiet the moment I walked in …never invited me for lunch…(R6), He would send me the work on Friday evening and then insist on ensuring it got completed by Monday morning (R7), He used to send me a mail with work but then not send the files (R13), We were told … "Branch manager jobs are meant for men" (R26), I was told "you are a girl … please don't try to act big" (R27)

4. Tyranny of silence/ Mobbing

"Evil happens, when good people look the other way".

In the narratives of my respondents, the perpetrators of psychological violence seemed to inflict an organized front against the individual with ongoing bullying, isolating and intimidating behaviours. This got socially transmitted in that, peers and others working in the same unit often looked the other way or even joined in. The victims seemed to feel a sense of despair in the face of so many powerful people acting together.

The failure to take action, or taking action which exacerbates abuse, rendered a communal nature to the problem.

> No one said anything … (R1), They consoled me but nothing really changed … (R2), When this guy would be sarcastic, others would also join in the sniggering (R8), He was powerful and leader of the "in-team" … so no one ever said anything to him (R10), He told me … "If you leave, this team will lose it's spring …(R13), Everyone knew about this behaviour but no one ever took any action (R16), One of them started to invite me for lunch but then one more girl signalled to her (R17), Everyone knew including HR but no one said a thing (R24) etc.

In organizations, silence makes those with the power and authority to intervene, complicit as passive accomplices. In the experiences of my respondents, it emerged that these alliances seemed to create a collective social experience in which psychological violence was not only acted out but also normalised and assimilated throughout the organization – as "an unpleasant but usual experience".

5. Impact on victims - Sense of helplessness, health consequences, impact on performance, left with a sense of betrayal (in cases where perpetrators were women)

One thing that was very consistent in the narratives of my respondents was the way in which the violence impacted the lives of my respondents. The impact reported by my respondents ranged from severe anxiety, disrupted sleep, loss of concentration, depression, lowered work motivation, poor productivity and in a few cases, panic attacks. The experience was felt at a psychological level but also at a very physical sensation level.

> I cried … huge impact on my engagement level … worried it will impact my performance and I will be asked to quit (R1), He would make this sly remark … imply that he always had power over me … I felt choked … I was just doing my work like a robot (R2), My face turned red and my head was throbbing …I really lost interest in that project (R3), I felt invisible … some days I didn't have the energy to go to work … I did the bare minimum … (R04), I started getting this feeling at the back of my back …I felt like I had no energy …if they put you on PIP there is nothing you can do (R5), It was exhausting …there was nothing I could do … I felt like someone had

punched me (R6), I lost weight … the quality of my work was rock bottom (R7) I felt exhausted all the time … after some time I couldn't take it anymore …etc.

What struck me was the huge cost that this was resulting in – for the organization – reduced productivity, creativity, poor trust and collaboration, loss of tacit knowledge through turnover as well as for the individual – loss of confidence, loss of self-esteem and the physical impact of all the stress and anxiety was huge.

There was also a sense of helplessness at what was happening. In one of the interviews, my respondent actually referred to a case of an employee in India, who had committed suicide because of mental harassment by his superior and another team member. While she had moved on from the workplace, it struck me as significant, that at some point in time, she may have been anxious or worried of how the process would escalate and how far would her tolerance stretch.

The usual coping mechanism was to tolerate and hope the violence stops and avoid "being seen" by withdrawing. In the few cases, where my respondents tried to explore possibilities for redressal by complaining, they were not given any help.

The gender of the perpetrator also seemed to play a role in the way my respondents reacted. When the perpetrators were men, there was a sense of indignation but also a sense of – "This is only expected". However, if the perpetrator was one or more women, the emotions also included anger and a sense of betrayal.

> I had informed her already … and still she yelled at me … (R3), Just because she was ahead … she thought she could get away with it … she used to dress attractively (R4) …On some days I felt like I should slap her (R7) Women managers get far more aggressive (R8), Bored, middle-aged, vicious women …(R10), Women are far more jealous of other women (R13) etc.

The comment – "women are women's worst enemies", seems to be evidenced as true, especially when we consider the woman-woman conflicts in a traditional patriarchal society. But my reflections led me to think that this sense of betrayal was possibly coming from:

- the imprint of "bringing families to work" and an unconscious acting out of "rivalries", fighting for the top position or for the favours of the powerful figure, or
- the tensions resulting from the opposing motivations behind social identification: need for assimilation (belonging with the group) and need for differentiation (being distinct from others) - (ODT; Brewer, 1991).

Are women getting more anxious when they see other women being as/ more successful to them? My own reflections of the narratives of my respondents, revealed that both of cases seem true - women perpetrators being harsher to their women subordinates or peers, and the victims feeling more betrayed that the source of violence was someone from the same gender.

The overall impact of their experiences stayed on, even after they had left the workplace. But the most important impact was the residual impact of what they were still carrying. It came across as a loss of the energy, enthusiasm and hope with which they had joined their careers. In almost all the cases, it was the victim who left their organization.

The "Inner Theatre":

"The belief that your actions have a direct impact on your outcomes is essential for your success and happiness in life".

Experiences of emotional turbulence and intimidation are understandably negative. However, my reflection of the narratives revealed that the intensity of the negative experience took on two very different trajectories depending on how my respondents were seeing their own role in the overall experience.

1. **High Locus of Control – Increased personalization of what happened – Increased intensity of impact:**

Those respondents that felt that they were responsible for everything that was happening, seemed to experience an additional layer of violence, in addition to what was happening them in the workplace. This theme seemed to be independent or irrespective of how their family and ecosystem was advising them to view it. This layer of violence felt like a whiplash which came from within.

> I was responsible … surely, I had done something wrong. Why was I not able to make this right? What could I have done differently? I should have not gone out for the team outing …? Of course, you question yourself...?

In the overall course of their life and career narratives, these were the same women who felt the most like they were in charge of their destiny. They seemed more driven and seemed to believe in "I am responsible for what happens to me". I found this understandable, because in order to be successful and play gender atypical roles in a patriarchal culture like India, one would expect the woman to have a reasonable amount of self-belief and internal locus of control. But it seemed to me that beyond a certain point, the locus of control and the tendency to personalize their life outcomes, seemed to be

impacting their coping mechanisms by making them feel like they were responsible for everything that happened to them and weighing down on them like a burden. The intensity of their negative experience seemed far higher than the other group.

Another interesting dimension is that in the reflections of these women on what had happened and how they would react, there seemed to be a stance of "this is unfair and needs to be redeemed". In their "sense-making" of what had happened to them, it was evident that they were still indignant about what happened and the way it was dealt with. They did not seem to think that this is acceptable and the feeling I was left with was a hope that if they see this happening to others, they are likely to see this as unacceptable behaviour and play a more constructive role than being a silent bystander.

2. **Low Locus of Control – A sense of detachment of what happened – Reduced intensity of impact:**

The other refrain that was emerging from the narratives was a sense of "I can only do so much to impact my fate". These respondents reported feeling a sense of powerlessness at what happened to them but also an acceptance that this is how it is supposed to be.

> What can you do? … Everyone told me this is how it is …I think this is very normal and no point in trying to fight it … Do your job and get out …

The overall theme emerging from this set of narratives was that "Beyond a certain point, I can't help what happens to me". This was also reflected in the way they spoke about their career and life choices. There was a sense of "do your bit but don't fight too much". The intensity of the impact also seemed relatively lower for this group of women. This group seemed to be deriving some comfort from an almost fatalistic stance and therefore "going with the flow".

In contrast to the earlier group, the reflections of these women on what had happened and how they would react, seemed to indicate a stance of "life is not always fair and there's no point fighting it". In their "sense-making" of what had happened to them, it was evident that while they didn't believe that what happened was fair or justified, they also concluded that this is not very unusual.

This group also seemed to indicate that "bad things can happen in large systems" and hence unlikely to speak out or get involved in the event that they saw this happening again.

The tendency to personalize what happens to them and how much control they have on their outcomes seems to emerge as the most powerful dimension to the overall experience of psychological violence. An experience by itself is neutral. It is the meaning that we give to it, that makes it positive or negative and this meaning comes from the internal value framework. Their locus of control either amplified or diffused the intensity of the pain that was induced by the experience. This also seemed to be a very powerful predictor of how my respondents are likely to react if they encounter this again or happening to another person.

Putting it all together:

Zooming out of the reflections of my respondents, I had the impression that the overall experience of psychological violence was tri-dimensional, and each dimension was influencing the other (**Figure 5: "The Experience of Psychological Violence"**.

Figure 5: The Experience of Psychological Violence
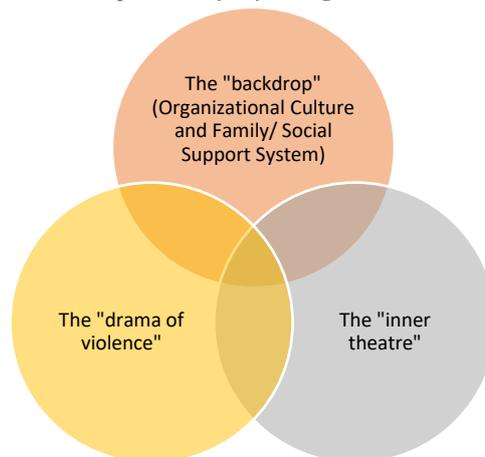
The language and cultural norms around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, in the organization and the family and social networks lends meaning to the experience itself and the way the respondent sees their role is determined by their "inner theatre". It is here that the experience is given a definite label, a certain value and resolutions for future reactions are created here.

I would argue that both gender as well as their early-stage placement in their career, prove to play an amplifying effect on the intensity of the impact because they add to the power differential by creating a power deficit in the overall equation between the perpetrator and the victim.

I would further argue that solving this problem will not be effective unless this issue is tackled at the level of the organization as well as the larger society.

Practical Implications:

There is substantial research to evidence that engaged and empowered employees are the key differentiators to success. Psychological safety and well-being form a large part of the overall experience. The results of this study suggest that the cost of psychological violence is too high for organizations to ignore. It impacts the overall experience of the employee, significantly reduces her creativity and confidence – impacting her sense of empowerment and engagement. Further if organizations have to truly create a best-in-class talent pipeline, they will need to be able to build an employer-brand that has inclusion as a cornerstone. This necessitates the investment in a culture that provides for an inclusive and safe environment for everyone, irrespective of gender.

I believe that research and investment in preventing psychological violence can have significant implications for organizational productivity and long-term potential.

Creating safe spaces to build inclusion as a capability: Organizations today are getting increasingly diverse, not just in terms of gender but also nationalities, age, educational qualifications, economic backgrounds and so on. Working in increasingly diverse groups may increase the danger of exclusion, isolation and an experience of hostility, especially for minority groups. Based on what I learnt during the course of my thesis, I believe that organizations need to consider the opportunities to create "safe and reflective spaces" for its members, to help them become more inclusive. Through team meetings, post-meeting reviews, self-reflection sessions, organizations can easily provide for safe spaces where people can talk honestly about their experiences as well as reflect on the impact of their actions and omissions. Instead of denying and looking the other way, organizations can leverage team and small-group reflection sessions as meaningful ways for people to connect with each other and develop empathy for each other.

Building psychological safety into processes: Many wrongdoings in organizations go unreported because of fear of retaliation. While organizations have created helplines that protect anonymity for ethical and compliance related issues, interpersonal grievances are left to be resolved at the manager-employee and at best unit HR level. However, given the complex, invisible and potentially contagious nature of psychological violence, there is a need to create mechanisms and processes for people to talk about and report, what's happening to them, in a way that protects them.

Creating and leveraging support networks: Senior members of the organization, experienced team members, mentors can provide guidance to new entrants as well "contain" anxieties. In my interviews,

many respondents spoke about other organizations where young entrants into the organizations were connected with mentors or buddy groups, which seemed to provide them with valuable guidance and insights on navigating organizational life. Investing in these may help organizations to maximise the sense of well-being and engagement of their employees.

Building people management and self-awareness skills in first time managers: Organizations today are changing rapidly. Rapid changes in direction to stay economically viable, continually changing organizational structures to adapt to the markets and a huge pressure to perform can create significant anxieties and stress in the managers of new entrants. This can have a damaging and potentially escalating impact on the phenomenon of psychological violence in organizations. While most organizations invest in senior leadership development and high-potential leadership development, little or no investment is made to provide the first-time managers – especially on critical skills related to emotional intelligence, gender sensitization, understanding and managing inter-group conflicts and understanding how to build engaged and inclusive teams. Investment in this area may go a long way to bring down attrition, increase team collaboration and overall employee engagement within organizations.

Limitations & Future research:

- **The selection of participants:** I have used the "snowballing" technique to get participants for my study. It is possible, that as a result of this, some inherent bias may have crept in the selection and hence any future study should take into account a more diverse population.

- **The role of "bystanders":** The study has been conducted only from the point of the view of the "victims". For a comprehensive understanding of the overall phenomenon, the role of the bystanders and their role in the overall process should be observed and analysed.

- **Inside the mind of the "perpetrator":** The view of what made the perpetrators act in the way they did and their intent, was reported from the point of view of the victims. To create a more balanced understanding of the process, it is important to understand the trigger, the valence and the intent of the "perpetrator" to understand the phenomenon of "psychological violence" and what can be done to manage and alleviate it.

- **Personal biases:** my own personal biases, memories of my own experiences and my gendered world-views, may have crept into how I saw my respondents' narratives, and this may have coloured my analysis of their experiences.

- **Examining the role of high pressure, unpredictable and volatile environments on the likelihood of organizations becoming fertile ground for "psychological violence":** There has been some research on the correlation between being in a high-pressure environment and the increased likelihood of workplace bullying, intimidation and incivility. However, this needs to be tested and researched as an independent variable. This would provide a lot of insights on the dimension of organizational culture emerging as a backdrop to phenomenon of psychological violence as well as what can be done to alleviate it.

Conclusion:

The results of my thesis extend the current literature on psychological violence in the workplace by highlighting the impact of psychological violence on early career women in India. The study highlighted the fact that the impact of psychological violence is severe both at an individual as well as collective level and the price is too high for organizations to ignore.

The study highlighted the vulnerability of early career women to the possibility of being subjected to psychological violence. It brought forth important dimensions of the experience, highlighting the critical role/s of organizational culture in the creation and assimilation of the experience of psychological violence, the role of family/ social support network in shaping the language of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and providing coping mechanisms and the individual locus of control – which determined how the participants saw their own role in the overall experience. The study also highlighted the woeful inadequacy of mechanisms in organizations, to provide for redressal and help.

An important next step in this research stream would be to explore and design interventions that have the potential to impact organizational culture as well as create spaces for dialogue to bring greater awareness at societal level - in a way that psychological violence is contained; and then demonstrate that such interventions would be associated with lower violence and have positive effects on employee well-being and engagement in the long run.

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Annexure 1: Invitation letter to participants

Shweta Kumar

Participant at INSEAD - Executive Master in Consulting and Coaching for Change (EMCCC)

Wave 27 (March 2018 – February 2020)

July 2019

I am a participant at the above-mentioned Executive Master's program at INSEAD. During the last 18 months I have participated in the EMCCC program including eight on-campus modules, three practicum experiences and a variety of individual and groups works experiences. In order to successfully graduate, I have to complete a research thesis:

My research topic: Psychological Violence: Impact on Early Career Women.

This thesis seeks to understand how the phenomenon of "Psychological violence" unfolds in organizations and how it impacts victims. I am specifically looking at the experiences of early career women (< 5 years of experience), at the workplace in India.

In this context, I would be grateful to have a conversation about your specific experiences. The interview will take place – July-August 2019; and will be completely confidential. If at all any references are made to respondents, in my thesis, those will be made anonymously. I will take detailed notes during the interview. The interview will comprise open ended questions related to your experiences.

Given the sensitive nature of the discussion, I appreciate your willingness to share your experiences. However, please note that you can withdraw your participation at any time. If some information is missed out or needs further clarification, I may request you for an additional meeting. Please let me know, if you have further questions that you want me to clarify before the interview.

Best regards,

Shweta