

The Invisible Victim: Masculinity, Stigma, and the Silencing of Male Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is widely recognized as a critical public health, human rights and social environment concern, yet research and policy continue to overwhelmingly frame it as a women's issue. Male survivors, particularly in patriarchal contexts across South Asia and the Global South, remain largely invisible in both academic discourse and service frameworks. This study examines the lived experiences of 25 adult male survivors of IPV in Bangladesh, representing diverse social, occupational, rural-urban, and geographical backgrounds. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns of masculine identity conflicts, stigma and ridicule, institutional neglect, and silent coping strategies. The findings are interpreted through the lenses of hegemonic masculinity and stigma theory, highlighting how cultural constructions of gender roles function to delegitimize male victimization. This study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on male IPV survivors in South Asia and calls for an urgent rethinking of gendered assumptions in IPV research, policy, and intervention. It advocates for gender-inclusive legal frameworks, sensitization of institutional actors, and culturally competent services that validate and support all survivors—regardless of gender.

Keywords: *intimate partner violence, male victimhood, masculinity, stigma, public health, social environment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has been largely theorized and documented as a phenomenon of women's victimization. The dominant discourse in both global and local research has overwhelmingly focused on women as survivors, while the lived realities of men subjected to IPV remain marginal and underexplored. In Bangladesh, this gap is even more pronounced, where cultural expectations of masculinity create significant barriers for men to disclose abuse or seek redress. Within criminal justice frameworks, the assumption that only women are victims has rendered male experiences nearly invisible, further reinforcing stigma and silence.

The Bangladeshi context presents a particularly layered set of challenges. Masculinity is socially constructed through expectations of physical strength, endurance, and dominance, and any deviation from these ideals invites ridicule or dismissal. Survivors who attempt to disclose abuse frequently face mockery, institutional neglect, or even disbelief from law enforcement officers. Such responses reinforce the cultural narrative that "a man cannot be a victim," leaving men silenced both in private and public domains. Similar findings have been documented in India (Sharma & Das, 2019), Pakistan (Zia et al., 2021), and Sri Lanka (Jayatilleke et al., 2020), where patriarchal frameworks and gender stereotypes systematically marginalize male survivors. This regional pattern underscores the importance of studying Bangladesh not as an isolated case but as part of a broader South Asian and Global South struggle for recognition of men's victimization.

Adding to this complexity are the **postcolonial legacies** that continue to shape state institutions and gender relations in Bangladesh. Colonial-era legal systems, designed with a strong emphasis on female victimhood and patriarchal order, continue to influence the implementation of domestic violence laws. As Connell (2020) and other postcolonial theorists argue, these legacies intersect with religious norms and class hierarchies to reinforce rigid gender binaries. For instance, men from rural and working-class backgrounds face stronger community-level stigma, where disclosure of abuse is equated with weakness and dishonor. Conversely, urban middle-class men may remain silent to protect professional reputation or avoid social embarrassment. Religious discourses also often valorize male sacrifice and endurance, discouraging men from presenting themselves as victims.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the role of **hybrid masculinities** (Demetriou, 2001; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) in understanding how men navigate these cultural constraints. Survivors may attempt to reconcile their abuse with dominant masculine ideals by emphasizing resilience, control, or self-reliance, even while acknowledging victimhood. Such fragmented identities reveal how deeply embedded gender expectations continue to silence men, even as they seek recognition. Expanding these insights to the Bangladeshi setting adds an essential South Asian dimension to the literature, which has often been dominated by Western accounts of male IPV.

Finally, despite increasing global awareness of male survivors of IPV (Morgan & Wells, 2016; Hines & Douglas, 2020; Adebayo, 2020), Bangladesh remains almost absent from scholarly debates. The invisibility of male victims here is not merely a research gap but also a profound social injustice. Recognizing IPV against men as a criminological and gendered issue is essential for rethinking justice, reforming institutional practices, and dismantling stigma. By situating Bangladeshi men's experiences within South Asian and Global South perspectives, this study aims to expand the theoretical and empirical understanding of IPV beyond its conventional gendered boundaries.

2. PRIOR RESEARCH

Although intimate partner violence (IPV) has long been a focus of global research and policy development, the overwhelming majority of scholarly and institutional attention has centered on female victims. Feminist criminology and gender-based violence studies have appropriately emphasized women's disproportionate exposure to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse by male partners, and this lens has been instrumental in shaping protective legal reforms, support services, and public awareness initiatives. However, this dominant narrative has simultaneously obscured the experiences of male victims—particularly those whose victimization disrupts socially constructed notions of masculinity and gender roles.

Global research has begun to acknowledge men's experiences of IPV, albeit unevenly. Studies in the United States and Europe (Hines & Douglas, 2010; Morgan & Wells, 2016) highlight barriers to disclosure, stigma, and institutional neglect. However, the Global South presents distinctive challenges shaped by cultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts. For example, Kumar (2012) in India and Sharma & Das (2019) show that male survivors are often ridiculed or disbelieved, while Zia et al. (2021) in Pakistan and Jayatilleke et al. (2020) in Sri Lanka reveal the pervasive role of social honor, class, and family structures in silencing male survivors. In Africa, Adebayo (2020) highlights similar invisibility, linking male victimization to colonial-era legal frameworks that continue to privilege female victimhood. Latin American studies (Ramirez, 2021) further emphasize how machismo discourses constrain male survivors, producing comparable silences.

Recent scholarship (2019–2024) has expanded this understanding. For instance, Sharma & Das (2019) provide evidence of male IPV survivors in India, while contemporary studies from South Asia (Khan, 2020; Zia et al., 2021) stress how religion, class, and rural-urban divides intersect with masculinity to discourage disclosure. Emerging works on hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001) and postcolonial masculinity (Connell, 2020; Chowdhury, 2021) provide useful theoretical insights into how men navigate their identities as victims while trying to maintain cultural expectations of strength and authority. These frameworks are particularly relevant in Bangladesh, where colonial legacies, religious expectations, and class structures remain powerful in shaping gender norms.

Despite this growing body of research, Bangladesh remains strikingly absent from comparative studies. While anecdotal reports and media coverage occasionally highlight male victimization, systematic scholarly engagement is almost non-existent. This absence not only marginalizes men's voices but also limits the scope of criminological, sociological, and gender theory in South Asia. Addressing this gap requires situating Bangladesh within the broader Global South discourse, where silenced masculinities have been increasingly documented but remain poorly theorized in terms of institutional neglect and stigma.

This study therefore builds on both classic literature (Connell, 1995; Goffman, 1963) and recent Global South research (Sharma & Das, 2019; Zia et al., 2021; Adebayo, 2020; Ramirez, 2021) to argue for the inclusion of Bangladeshi male survivors within the global discourse of IPV. By doing so, it expands the

conceptual boundaries of IPV and foregrounds the importance of intersectionality, hybrid masculinities, and postcolonial analysis in understanding how silence is produced and sustained in specific cultural contexts.

In short, while prior research has begun to explore male experiences of IPV in Western contexts, there remains a glaring gap in the literature concerning men in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. This study addresses that gap by providing empirical evidence on how Bangladeshi men navigate intimate partner violence in a society where masculine identity and honor play a central role in determining the legitimacy of victimhood.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of men who have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in Bangladesh. Phenomenology is a powerful methodological approach for examining sensitive, emotionally charged, and under-discussed phenomena, particularly those grounded in personal experience and identity. The aim was to uncover how male survivors make sense of their victimization in a society where such narratives are typically silenced by dominant gender norms.

By using phenomenology, the researcher sought to understand not only the external events that occurred but also the internal meanings participants ascribed to their experiences—how they interpreted, resisted, suppressed, or transformed their understanding of themselves and their social roles in light of abuse. The methodology prioritized depth over breadth, aiming to engage deeply with subjective realities that quantitative or survey-based approaches might fail to capture.

3.2 Participants and Sampling Strategy

Using purposive and snowball sampling strategies, 25 adult male survivors of IPV were recruited from four regions of Bangladesh. Participants represented diverse socio-economic and occupational backgrounds, spanning rural, semi-urban, and urban contexts. This diversity was critical to ensure that variations in class, religion, and geographical location could be examined as shaping factors in the silencing of survivors. Eligibility criteria included being over 18 years of age and having experienced intimate partner violence within the last ten years.

Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) identify as male; (2) have experienced psychological, emotional, physical, or financial abuse by a current or former female intimate partner; (3) be aged 18 or above; and (4) be willing and able to participate in a semi-structured interview process. Most participants were in heterosexual marriages or long-term partnerships; none self-identified as belonging to sexual or gender minority groups, which aligns with the demographic structure of the studied regions.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a six-month period from August 2024 to February 2025. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews served as the primary data source. Interviews were conducted in Bengali to facilitate participant comfort and authentic expression, and later translated into English for analysis. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a safe, private location chosen by the participant, including homes, open places, or quiet cafés. In one case, a remote audio interview was conducted due to geographic constraints.

An interview guide was developed based on existing IPV literature, with open-ended questions focusing on:

- The nature of the abuse
- Interpretations of masculinity and power in their relationships
- Help-seeking behavior and disclosure
- Reactions from family, peers, and institutions
- Emotional and psychological coping mechanisms

Probing questions allowed the researcher to explore participants' emotional language, bodily responses, and silences—all of which were treated as data in the interpretive process.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study followed strict ethical protocols approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University. Participants provided informed consent prior to their interviews and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were securely stored with restricted access.

Given the emotionally sensitive nature of the interviews, participants were offered a referral list for local counseling and psychosocial support services. While most declined additional support, two participants requested follow-up resources, which were promptly provided.

Researcher reflexivity was also practiced throughout the project. The principal investigator maintained a reflexive journal to document emotional responses, ethical dilemmas, and positionality in relation to the topic and participants.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

1. **Familiarization:** Transcripts were read repeatedly, with initial notes on tone, silences, contradictions, and narrative flow.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Descriptive and interpretive codes were assigned to chunks of text using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were grouped under broader thematic umbrellas aligned with research questions and emerging patterns.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Redundant or overlapping themes were collapsed, and divergent cases were closely examined.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Final themes were named to reflect the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of male IPV victimhood.
6. **Producing the Report:** Data excerpts were selected for thematic illustration and integrated into the larger narrative and theoretical framework.

The analysis focused not only on what participants said but also on what remained unsaid—the hesitations, contradictions, and moments of emotional rupture—recognizing that silence itself is a meaningful form of data in studies of stigma and masculinity.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two interlocking theoretical lenses: **hegemonic masculinity theory** and **stigma theory**, both of which provide critical insight into the silencing and delegitimization of male IPV survivors.

Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 1995)

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity describes the culturally exalted form of manhood that upholds male dominance, physical and emotional control, and heteronormative authority. In the Bangladeshi context, this form of masculinity is reinforced through religious, familial, and social institutions. It creates a hierarchy in which men are expected to maintain control in relationships, financially provide for their families, and demonstrate emotional stoicism. Men who experience abuse—especially at the hands of a female partner—are seen as violating these ideals and are subsequently marginalized.

In this framework, male victims do not simply suffer abuse; they suffer an identity crisis that challenges the social legitimacy of their manhood. Their silence, therefore, is not only a result of fear or shame—it is a form of survival in a cultural structure that offers no narrative for the “abused man.”

Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963)

Goffman's theory of stigma helps explain the social mechanisms that prevent men from disclosing abuse or accessing support. Male victims are stigmatized not only because they are seen as weak, but because they disrupt the moral order of gender relations. In the public imagination, victimhood is feminized. A man who claims victimhood risks being treated as deviant, not just pitied.

This stigma operates on multiple levels: individual (internalized shame), interpersonal (mockery or disbelief), and structural (neglect by institutions). It compels men to either remain silent or reframe their experiences in socially acceptable terms—such as “marital problems” or “loss of peace”—instead of abuse.

These two frameworks together allow for a nuanced analysis of male IPV in Bangladesh—not simply as isolated acts of violence, but as experiences deeply shaped by gender ideologies and power relations.

5. FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the 25 in-depth interviews revealed four major themes that together illustrate how masculine identity, social expectations, and institutional barriers shape male victims' experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Bangladesh. Participants' narratives reflect complex emotional landscapes, nuanced decision-making, and recurring tensions between their experiences of victimization and cultural constructs of manhood.

5.1 Performing Strength: The Internal Conflict of Masculinity and Victimhood

Most participants recounted significant emotional struggle when first attempting to label their experiences as “abuse.” Being raised within patriarchal norms that equated masculinity with emotional control, physical dominance, and problem-solving autonomy, these men expressed a deep sense of internal conflict when faced with victimization.

“It didn’t feel real at first. I’m supposed to be the one in control. My wife screamed at me, threw things, and once even slapped me in front of my child. I stood there, frozen, not out of fear—but out of shame. I couldn’t be weak. Men don’t break down.” (Participant 3, 39 years).

Participants consistently minimized their early experiences, rationalizing insults, threats, or even physical attacks as “normal marital conflict.” Many delayed or avoided labeling the behavior as abuse to protect their self-image as capable, respected men. This denial was not just psychological—it was deeply social, embedded in what they believed others expected from them.

5.2 ‘Who Will Believe You?’: Stigma, Shame, and the Social Dismissal of Male Victimhood

Across all narratives, stigma emerged as a pervasive barrier to disclosing abuse. Participants described being ridiculed, invalidated, or met with sarcasm when attempting to share their experiences with friends, relatives, or even coworkers. Some feared they would be branded as failures, others as liars or manipulators.

“I told a colleague after she hit me with a belt. He laughed and said, ‘Brother, she must love you a lot!’ That was the last time I told anyone for a long time.” (Participant 25, 31 years).

This societal disbelief was particularly pronounced among male social circles. Several participants explained that admitting abuse to other men was akin to “losing face” or “inviting insult.” Many felt isolated and began to retreat from social settings entirely.

“If you say a woman is beating you, they think you’re joking. Or worse, they think you’re not a real man. It’s humiliating. I stopped going to tea stalls, mosque, even weddings.” (Participant 5, 44 years).

Family responses were equally troubling. Even when male victims confided in close relatives, they were often met with denial or blame.

“My brother said I must have provoked her. My mother said I should tolerate it for the sake of the children. I felt like I was drowning, and no one saw me.” (Participant 4, 36 years).

5.3 Invisible to the System: Rejection by Police, Courts, and Service Providers

Participants who attempted to seek formal help were overwhelmingly met with disbelief, mockery, or procedural refusal. Of the 25 men interviewed, only five had reported their abuse to the police, and all of them described the experience as degrading or futile.

“The officer laughed and said, ‘Do you want me to file a case against your wife for slapping you? Grow up.’ I left that station feeling more helpless than ever.” (Participant 2, 47 years).

Legal aid centers and NGOs were also described as inaccessible or unfriendly to men. Many reported being turned away or given materials meant for female survivors. Some described the physical spaces of service centers—decorated with posters of battered women and staffed mostly by women—as “unwelcoming” or “off-limits.”

“The counselor didn’t even let me finish. She said their program was for women only. She didn’t know where I could go. I left, sat outside for an hour, and cried.” (Participant 8, 34 years).

The repeated institutional rejection reinforced the internal belief that their suffering was not legitimate, and thus, not worthy of support. A few participants spoke of contemplating vigilante action or suicide, expressing profound despair at being failed by both their society and their state.

5.4 Coping in the Shadows: Emotional Repression, Isolation, and Survival Mechanisms

In the absence of recognition or support, male victims were left to create their own coping strategies. These ranged from emotional withdrawal and hyperfocus on work, to substance abuse and religious retreat. Many men said they stayed in the abusive relationship far longer than they should have due to fear of public humiliation, financial dependency, or concern for their children.

“I worked 16-hour days. I didn’t want to be home. When I was, I stayed in the veranda. She would scream inside. I just sat outside, smoking, pretending I didn’t hear.” (Participant 13, 40 years).

A significant number of participants described symptoms consistent with depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Yet none had accessed professional mental health support. Several admitted they were speaking openly about their abuse for the first time during the interview.

“Sometimes I wished she would hit me harder. That way, someone might notice. But I never had marks. Just this... feeling that I had no worth left.” (Participant 17, 51 years).

Religious practice emerged as a double-edged coping tool: for some, prayer and spiritual reflection offered comfort and self-worth; for others, it reinforced silence through messages of male duty and sacrifice.

These findings expose a multilayered system of denial—internal, social, and institutional—that male IPV survivors in Bangladesh must navigate. While the violence itself may be interpersonal, the silence surrounding it is profoundly structural. In a culture where manhood is synonymous with power, male pain becomes unspeakable, and male victimhood, unimaginable.

6. DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine how Bangladeshi men experience, interpret, and respond to intimate partner violence in a socio-cultural context where traditional masculinity norms dominate both public discourse and institutional responses. The findings illustrate a powerful convergence of psychological, social, and structural forces that render male IPV survivors not only invisible but, in many cases, silent and stigmatized.

A key theme that emerged from the data—“**The Mask of Masculinity**”—demonstrates how cultural scripts surrounding manhood hinder the very recognition of victimhood. Participants often internalized the belief that acknowledging abuse was synonymous with admitting weakness or failure. This aligns with Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, where the ideal man is expected to be emotionally stoic, physically dominant, and in control of domestic affairs. Any deviation from these standards—such as being dominated or harmed by a female partner—renders a man subordinate in the gender hierarchy, and therefore socially illegitimate.

These internal conflicts were not isolated personal dilemmas but manifestations of a broader **patriarchal order** that binds men to impossible ideals. The findings reveal that many participants initially denied their experiences as abuse, dismissing it as a “marital problem” or “part of being a husband.” This minimization is consistent with global literature suggesting that male victims often reinterpret their trauma in culturally acceptable terms (Hines & Douglas, 2010). However, in Bangladesh, where public performance of masculinity is tied to familial honor and religious obligations, the pressure to maintain that mask is particularly intense.

The theme “**Social Shame and Stigmatized Disclosure**” further illustrates how external validation of masculinity exacerbates male victims’ emotional isolation. Participants reported being mocked, ignored, or advised to “control their wives” when they attempted to confide in others. This reaction exemplifies what Goffman (1963) conceptualized as enacted stigma—where social rejection reinforces internalized feelings of shame. In these moments, participants were not only denied empathy; they were also repositioned as deviant men who had failed to meet masculine expectations. These findings mirror Tsui’s (2014) work, which documented similar patterns of disbelief and derision in male IPV disclosures across multiple cultural contexts.

Perhaps most troubling was the systemic rejection participants encountered through **institutional neglect**. Police officers, legal aid workers, and even social service providers often failed to recognize the legitimacy of male victimhood. Some participants were mocked or turned away; others were subtly redirected to accept abuse as a personal failing or marital misunderstanding. This points to a **gendered bias in state and NGO responses**—not necessarily out of malice, but from structural assumptions that IPV victims are,

by default, women. This invisibilization is also reflected in Bangladesh's legal framework, which lacks any explicit recognition of men as potential IPV complainants.

This neglect is not unique to Bangladesh. Research from India (Kumar, 2012) and Western contexts (Morgan & Wells, 2016) shows that male victims frequently encounter disbelief, ridicule, or bureaucratic inaction. However, what sets the Bangladeshi context apart is the **cultural sanctification of gender roles**: the husband as provider and protector, the wife as subordinate and dependent. These roles are not only socially expected but also often religiously reinforced, making deviations from them appear immoral or unnatural. When men fail to perform their assigned roles—either through economic hardship or loss of authority—they not only lose social capital but also become more vulnerable to abuse and less able to report it.

The final theme, **“Coping in the Shadows,”** demonstrates the psychological toll of prolonged silence. Many participants described depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and emotional withdrawal. Coping strategies ranged from overworking and substance use to religious retreat. Significantly, no participant had accessed formal mental health care, even though several showed signs of chronic trauma. This is consistent with research by Addis & Mahalik (2003), which shows that masculine norms discourage emotional expression and help-seeking behaviors, even when individuals are in crisis.

Collectively, these findings underscore that male IPV in Bangladesh is not merely underreported—it is structurally unspeakable. Men are caught in a **double bind**: to speak out is to risk ridicule, emasculation, or dismissal; to remain silent is to internalize trauma and perpetuate invisibility. The result is a population of survivors who suffer alone, unsupported by family, alienated from institutions, and trapped by their own gender identity.

Therefore, addressing IPV against men requires more than gender-neutral laws or expanded shelters. It demands a **cultural reckoning with masculinity itself**—a deliberate dismantling of the idea that strength means silence, that honor means control, and that vulnerability is weakness. In this regard, both the state and civil society have a role to play—not only in creating inclusive policies but also in shifting the social narratives that currently prevent men from naming, owning, and healing from their experiences of abuse.

7. SIGNIFICANCE AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Limitations

As with all qualitative studies, this research has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, is not statistically generalizable to the entire population of male IPV victims in Bangladesh. The study focused primarily on cisgender, heterosexual men, and did not explore the experiences of transgender men, gay men, or men in same-sex relationships—groups that may face unique challenges in relation to IPV and stigma.

Second, recruitment relied heavily on snowball sampling and social networks, which may have resulted in sample bias. Participants who were willing to share their stories might differ in important ways from those who chose to remain silent. In particular, men from rural or conservative backgrounds may be underrepresented, as logistical and cultural barriers may have discouraged participation.

Third, while every effort was made to ensure emotional safety during interviews, the sensitive nature of the topic may have led some participants to withhold aspects of their experiences, especially in relation to sexual abuse or suicidal ideation.

Finally, although thematic analysis allows for deep engagement with meaning, the researcher's positionality may have influenced the interpretation of findings. Reflexivity was practiced throughout, but complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative research. Rather, the findings should be viewed as co-constructed narratives shaped by both participant and researcher subjectivity.

7.2 Recommendations

In light of the findings and limitations of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to inform future policy, practice, and research:

a. Legal Reform

- Revise existing domestic violence laws in Bangladesh to include gender-neutral language and explicitly acknowledge male victims.

- Develop guidelines for police and court personnel to respond sensitively and seriously to male disclosures of IPV.

b. Service Provision

- Establish male-friendly support centers with trained counselors, legal aid, and crisis hotlines specifically equipped to handle male victimization.
- Integrate IPV education for men into existing mental health, addiction, and community outreach services.

c. Public Awareness Campaigns

- Launch targeted media campaigns to destigmatize male vulnerability and encourage help-seeking behavior.
- Highlight real-life stories of male survivors (with consent) to challenge stereotypes and humanize the issue.

d. Professional Training

- Train social workers, psychologists, police officers, and NGO staff on recognizing and supporting male victims.
- Introduce IPV modules into law enforcement and legal education curricula that address the full spectrum of gendered victimization.

e. Research and Monitoring

- Conduct large-scale, mixed-methods research on male IPV across urban and rural settings.
- Explore intersections of IPV with class, religion, sexuality, and disability to build a more comprehensive picture of male vulnerability in Bangladesh.

f. Cultural Engagement

- Engage religious leaders, community elders, and local influencers in reshaping harmful narratives of masculinity that hinder healing and disclosure.
- Promote community dialogues on healthy relationships, emotional literacy, and shared responsibility in family life.

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