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# LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WITH HIRSUTISM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore women's perception about their excessive body hair growth.

**Methods:** After getting permission from Ethical Review Committee (ERC) this study was conducted at different hospitals and clinics of Lahore from July 2019 to June 2020 by employing exploratory qualitative method. Using purposive sampling, eight unmarried women with age range of 18-30 years were interviewed through semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews were analysed using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis that involved a comprehensive review of the women's lived experiences and generated themes.

**Results:** The finding revealed that the overall attitude of women is disappointed and they spend their life with a personality that is not acceptable for them or unwanted. They were suffering from emotional instability in their lives to please interpersonal relationships with others. Some women reported that physical problems (i.e., hormonal imbalance) have impaired their life internally and externally that caused hirsutism. Further, social interaction of women was found limited.

**Conclusion:** Hirsutism intensely influences women's experiences of their bodies in a negative way, and deeply affects their idea about themselves, self-esteem, social interaction, sleep and daily life activities.

**Keywords:** Hirsutism; Psychological Problems; Emotional Problems; Physical Problems; Social Problems.

## INTRODUCTION

Hirsutism is a social stigma; in medical terminology, it is named as hypertrichosis. It is derived from the Latin word 'hirsutus' which means hairy and is defined by the presence of excessive terminal hair growth in androgen-sensitive areas within the hair follicles in females including the moustache, whiskers region, upper chest, and pubic area during reproductive age.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of hirsutism is 10% in most populations.<sup>3</sup> Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is the most common reason for hirsutism brought about by undesired sexual hormones that can be carried about the sporadic cycle, heftiness, fruitlessness, and once in a while various growths on your ovaries.<sup>4</sup>

Polycystic ovary syndrome can lead to different complications including obesity, metabolic disorders, cosmetic problems, infertility, and psychological disorders.<sup>5</sup> Due to unwanted hair growth women experience high psychological burdens; low self-esteem, withdrawal from social interaction, loneliness, and depression which disturbs their daily lives.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the presence of male pattern facial hair causes much psychological distress such as lack of control, inferior-

ity complex, hopelessness, avoidance, and tension for many women because of its visibility.<sup>7</sup> Acne, decreased breast size, clitoris enlargement, irregular menstruation, and hormones are the indicators of hirsutism and these problems lead to the instability of emotions in women.<sup>8</sup>

Excessive hair growth is associated with social and psychological difficulties including anxiety and social phobia, insecurity about interpersonal relationships, shattered confidence, and profound psychological squeal.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, facial hair has affected their ability to form relationships.

Results of a study conducted that hirsutism has a massive psychosocial impact, particularly in the young females.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, another study revealed that hirsutism, obesity, irregular menstruation challenge personal and societal expectations of femininity.<sup>16</sup> It was concluded in the study that hirsutism has a strong impact on the women's health-related quality of life, followed by body irregular menses and infertility.<sup>15</sup> The present research is on exploring the lived experiences of women who are with excessive body hair growth (hirsutism). The phenomenon of hirsutism has increased across

the globe in women due to different reasons i.e., hormonal imbalance. They are at increased risk of developing low self-esteem, inferiority complex, rejection and bullying etc. Therefore, this study has been designed to bring forth the consequences faced by women with hirsutism. It also aimed to get a detailed understanding of women's perception about their excessive body hair growth. The findings of this research can provide a good insight about the issues encountered by those women who are dealing with excessive body hair. It will provide an opportunity for health professionals to help and design culturally sensitive interventions for women to further improve their quality of life and reduce their psychological, emotional, physical, and social problems. It will also be help full for teachers, parents, and communities of society to know how to deal with women who survive with such type of problems.

## ■ METHODOLOGY

The phenomenological research method was used in this study and it was conducted between July 2019 to June 2020 at different hospitals and clinics of Lahore. Ethical clearance was taken from the departmental Ethical Review Committee (Ref # FSS & H/ERC/RICPP/19/0163). The phenomenological research method provides in-depth and rich data about the participants' experiences. It offers an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and allows readers to form their own view about it. This methodology helps to reveal the nature of the phenomenon through reflecting on experiences and feelings the individuals have that provides unfathomable insight into the experiences.<sup>25</sup> Purposive sampling technique was utilized for the selection of data. A sample of eight unmarried women (N=8) with age range of 18-30 years was selected through the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the research. The study included those women as participants who were on medication for the treatment of hirsutism (facial hair) with duration

of at least one year and who had at least 3 visits at any hospital and clinic regarding their hair growth problem. Women with irregular menstruation cycles, diagnosed with/without polycystic ovary syndrome, using home remedies (multanimati, flour mask) or self-treatment (waxing, threading) to control unwanted facial hair were also included. Those women were expelled who were diagnosed with any chronic disease (i.e., cancer) and psychological disorder or had physical impairment.

Then the selected participants were approached and explained about purpose of the study afterwards informed consent was taken to continue research. All the ethical considerations were followed. Interviews for data collection had been performed with the aid of a demographic sheet, semi-structured interview guide, and audio recording. The demographic variables included age, education, family system, area of residence, marital status, religion employment status, health condition, duration of problem, type of treatment/remedies and any previous medical/psychiatry history (Table 1). Semi-structured interview included main research questions, sub-questions, and probing questions.<sup>18</sup> Interview guide was formulated based on past literature. The interview guide featured questions aimed at understanding the experiences of women dealing with hirsutism, specifically the excessive growth of body hair. These questions explored psychological, emotional, physical, and social aspects related to the condition. Participants were asked to describe their experiences with body hair growth in areas like the face, chest, and abdomen. The guide further delved into the psychological challenges and emotional impact of hirsutism, as well as the physical difficulties it presents in daily life. Additionally, participants were prompted to share any emotional struggles they encountered due to the condition and to discuss potential social issues, including societal perceptions and interactions influenced by hirsutism.

Interviews were conducted by the main author in two settings. In first setting, rapport was built; place and timing were determined for an in-depth interview. In the second setting (hospital/clinic), interviews were performed. Interview length ranged from 40 minutes to 1: 00 hour. Three participants were obtained from the hospitals and the remaining five from the clinics. Interviews were audio recorded along with short notes of verbal cues on blank sheet. Later on, all recorded interviews were transcribed. Subsequently, interview transcripts were examined carefully, variety of times to apprehend the real meanings. Moreover, all recorded interviews were transcribed and themes were generated by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse specific statements and all possible meanings. The phenomenological analysis provides realistic information that leads to a practical understanding of the phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> After that suitable or similar themes were put in one cluster and themes were defined and explained one by one by mentioning participants' verbatim. Seale (1999) method was used to ensure the findings of the research which involve credibility, transferability, rich thick description, dependability and conformability.

## ■ RESULTS

Demographic information was composed by filling questionnaires from each participant noted on demographic form. Following table shows demographic characteristics of the participants. Each participant was assigned number called participant number just for case to identification.

### Themes

Themes were generated and analysing using interpretative phenomenological analysis to evaluate specific statements and all possible meanings, in this method issues generated on the premise of reviews shared

Table 1: Summary of the Demographic Characteristics of Women.

Participant No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age	28	26	18	30	30	27	29	23
Religion	Muslim	Muslim	Muslim	Muslim	Muslim	Muslim	Muslim	Muslim
Education	M.Sc.	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Primary	Graduation	M.Sc.	Graduation
Area	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Rural	Urban	Urban
Family System	Nuclear	Joint	Nuclear	Joint	Joint	Nuclear	Joint	Nuclear
No Family Members	3	5	7	9	9	7	5	4
Birth Order	First Born	Middle born	Middle born	Middle born	Middle born	Middle	Last born	Last born
Type of Accommodation	Home	Home	Home	Home	Home	Hostel	Home	Home
Work Status	Employed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Employed	Unemployed	Employed	Employed	Unemployed
Health Condition	Average	Average	Somewhat satisfactory	Average	Average	Somewhat unsatisfactory	Average	Average
Duration of Problem	12 years	10 years	2 years	8 years	12 years	5 years	3 years	4 years
Type of Treatment	Threading/waxing	Threading/waxing	Home Remedies	Threading/ home remedies	Threading/ home remedies	Threading/waxing	Threading waxing	Threading/waxing

Table 2: List of Themes

Categories	Main Themes	Sub Themes
Psychological Problems	Living with Unwanted Self	Self-Acceptance
		Lack of Control
		Low Self Esteem
		Inferiority Complex
		Hopelessness
		Avoidance
		Stress
	Disappointment	Disappointment with self
	Disappointment with others	
Emotional Problems	Anxiousness	
	Sadness	
	Fearfulness	
	Anger	
	Shamefulness	
	Comparison	
Physical Problems	Internal Problems	Low Energy
		Sleep Disturbance
		Hormonal Changes
		Health Problem
		Appetite Problem
	External Problems	Obesity
		Over weight
		Height problem
		Dark complexion
		Allergies
		Itching
		Acne
		Wounds
Social Problems	Social Pressure	Bullying
		Rejection
		Lack of social interaction
	Social Support	Family Support
		Community Support

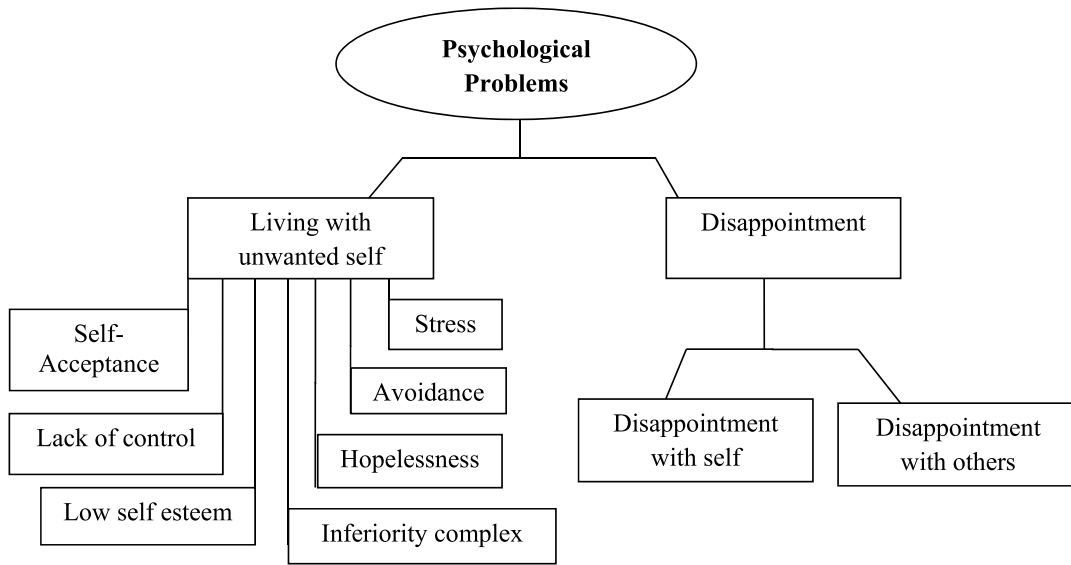


Figure 1: Showing main themes and sub themes of psychological experienced by women with Hirsutism

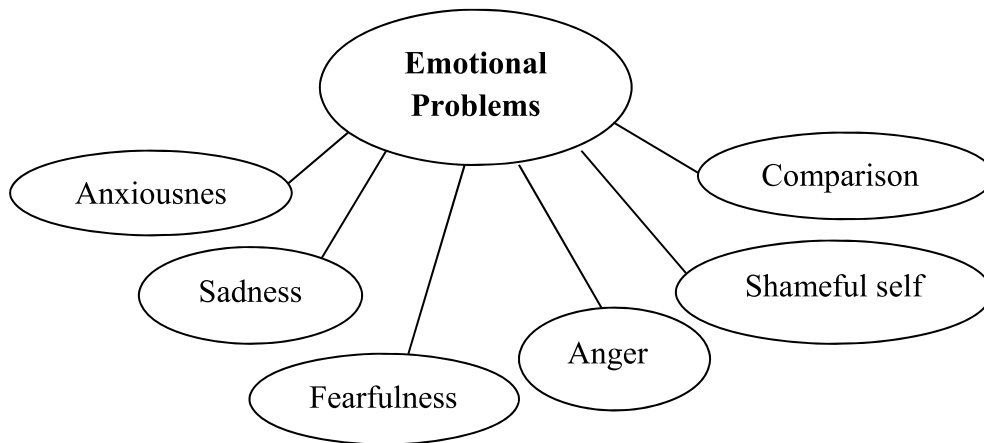


Figure 2: Emotional Problems Experienced by Women with Hirsutism.

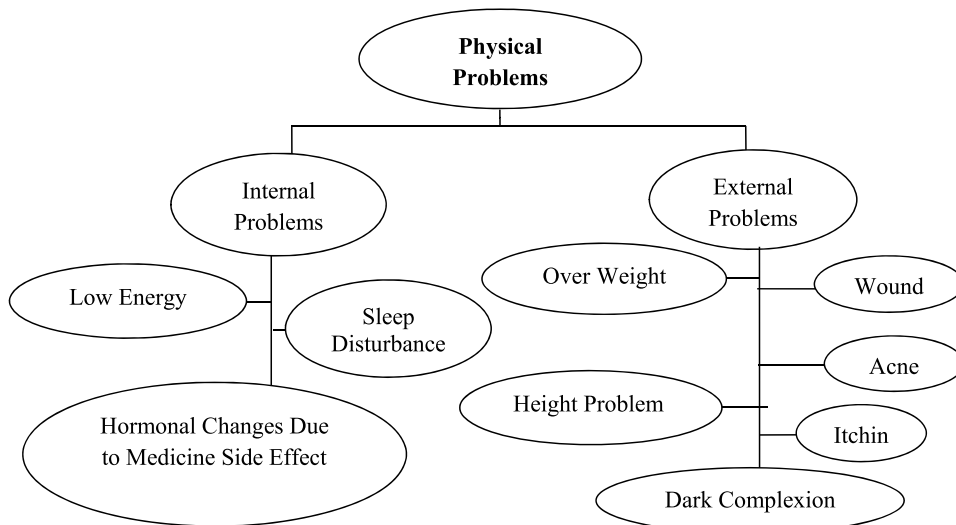


Figure 3: Physical Problems Experienced by Women with Hirsutism.

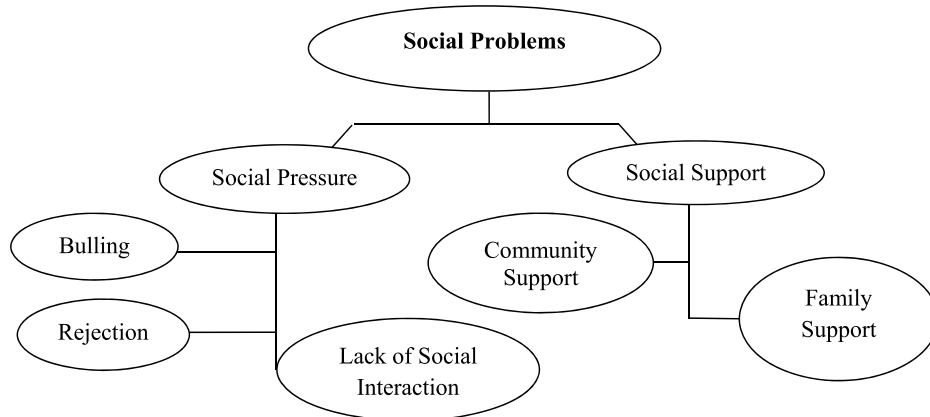


Figure 4: Social problems experienced by woman with Hirsutism

by woman they experienced. All notable or-  
 ordinate topics accompanied by subordinate  
 themes could be discussed in detail along  
 the interpretations and verbatim of the par-  
 ticipants below.

Category 1: Psychological Problems

Women face many psychological chang-  
 es due to unwanted excessive hair growth as  
 shown in the diagram below.

1-Living with Unwanted Self

Women reported that their experienc-  
 es were worsening their sense of self due  
 to hirsutism. Sub theme one narrated that  
 negative judgement about self-made their  
 life miserable. Women accepted this as they  
 reported:

*It was a part of my life; I couldn't get rid  
 of it (2)*

In the second sub theme women told that  
 excessive hair growth is unfortunate and they  
 have failed to control their bodily changes

*There was no solution to reduce their  
 growth; as much you tried to stop them, they  
 keep growing spontaneously (4)*

Thirdly, Participants mentioned that they  
 perceived themselves as worthless, and  
 experienced low self-esteem inside them.

Women felt insecure, useless, and feel infe-  
 rior in front of others:

*People dislike me because I look weird (6)*

*There are many girls in this world, why do  
 I have hair on my face? (6)*

Participants said that they did not expect  
 future improvement; their lives will never get  
 better. They also tried to stay away directly or  
 indirectly from other people or situations that  
 is pitiable for them.

*I have this problem and I don't think it will  
 ever end, there is hopelessness everywhere  
 (4)*

*When someone talks about my hair prob-  
 lem, I will try to ignore or leave that place  
 instantly (3)*

Participants showed stress in their ver-  
 batim during the interview. The persistent  
 negative response from the community was  
 a constant source of stress.

*When someone laughs at me, it puts a lot  
 of pressure on my mind. (3)*

2-Disappointment

Participants said that people are cruel  
 and try to hurt others without any reason just  
 for the sake of their enjoyment.

Participants complained that they were  
 not presentable like other women. Partic-  
 ipants expressed that people judge them  
 based on their looks and they feel embar-  
 rassed and hated.

*I wish it was not with me, I feel crying (7)*

*Why I am the victim of people's gossip, I  
 feel bad about it. (3)*

Category 2: Emotional Problems

Participants showed emotional instability  
 and anxious behaviour.

Anxiousness effects on person's at-  
 tention, behaviour, world-views, and belief  
 systems.<sup>10</sup> Participants complained It's an  
 emotional pain associated with the feeling of  
 grief and sorrow.<sup>11</sup> Participants reported it  
 in their verbatim as:

*My facial hair problem makes me anxious  
 in front of people. (2) When I see myself, I  
 feel sad (4).*

Humans seek other's approval but when  
 they don't receive it, they feel afraid to meet  
 them. Likewise, in my study result women  
 with facial hair problems think that other  
 people might not approve of their true selves  
 and reject them. Anger is also evolved as a  
 way of survival and defence. Participants ex-  
 pressed anger during the interview.

*I feel scared whenever I have to meet someone. (1)*

*When people say what happened, and why it happened, I get very angry. (2)*

*A painful experience with one's physical appearance tends to induce shame. Participants reported that (I feel shame to see myself, my face is not clean it's weird, 6) None of my cousins had hair on their faces except me. Family members differentiate between me and my cousins. (1)*

### Category 3: Physical Problems

The physical problem includes two major themes (1) internal problems and (2) external problems which are further divided into sub-themes mentioned in the diagram.

#### 1-Internal Physical Problem

Participants reported that they face many internal problems due to hirsutism. In which top of list was low energy because it's a common condition felt by everyone at some point in time. They also face difficulty in maintaining sleep affect human daily activities, stress due to excessive hair growth problem was the main cause of sleep problems in females. Following were the verbatims,

*I feel like my energy is decreasing. (6)*

*My sleep is disturbed due to a hair problem that is why I can't sleep. (6)*

Moreover, Women experience numerous durations of hormonal changes in their lifetime, during puberty, and menstruation, especially in pre-menopause, menopause, and post-menopause. Medication side effects add more problems, especially when treatment goes wrong and does not give preferred outcomes.

*Hormones are the root cause of this problem. (8)*

*I took medicines for stomach pain; I think that's why I am having this problem. (5)*

#### 2-External Physical Problems

Participants told they have experienced many physical problems as: over weight, height problem and dark complexion etc. In over weight condition, body weight is greater than what is considered normal for a certain height and shorten height, this is a widespread term for people whose height is extensively below average. Participants were experiencing bulky figures due to hirsutism.

*I've been gaining weight since I had my hair problem. (8)*

*My height is not increasing normally as it should be. (1)*

The participants thought their hair problem had influenced not only their body but also their complexion. Participants tried several methods to remove excessive hair growth which turned their skin dark. Women also experienced severe itching on their face; arms and legs when new hairs were growing after removal. Acne Can be found almost everywhere in the body but commonly it's appearing on the face. Wounds also appear in their faces.

*I have noticed that my colour has changed due to this issue. (6)*

*Hair removal is painful and hair reapparence is so itchy that it is intolerable. (8)*

*My face is so bad some marks don't go away. (8)*

*I have got wounds after waxing, but it is the hair that does not leave me. (3)*

### Category 4: Social Problems

Figural representation of social problems, main themes, and sub-themes are mentioned below

#### 1-Social Pressure

Society shapes every person's practice, judgement, and beliefs and social pressure changes individual minds on emotionally charged issues. Women said that they experienced social pressure many times at their job, family functions, and friend parties. In social pressure Bullying cause aggressive behaviour among human that involves an actual or supposed authority inequality. Rejection also occurs in these situations when an individual is intentionally excluded from a social relationship or interaction. Women felt sad when they talked about social rejection by others. These things cause lack of social interaction especially for women side.

*Siblings and friends pass jokes that you are like a man. (3)*

*This is the reason for the refusal of my proposal and job. (1)*

*I am reluctant to go out of the house because I can't face people's criticism. (3)*

#### 2-Social Support

It's referring to the variety of support that humans obtain from others. My study shows following two social support family support and community support. Verbatim as below

*It does not feel good when family members make jokes. (2) Women in the neighbourhood say weird things about me. (2)*

## ■ DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences and perceptions of women lived with excessive body hair. The findings of the study showed that the body was experienced as an ugly and disgrace, all experiences closely intertwined. The nature of the study was exploratory that cover the four main areas of their life i.e., Psychological, Emotional, Physical, and Social Problems. Further, emerged main themes and sub themes from whole transcript underline the categories selected from their life. The women in present study were mentally preoccupied with their excessive hair growth which felt like they had no existence in this world. Almost all women said the facial hair was repetitively on their cognizance and almost two-thirds were each time checking in the mirror for hair.

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The women in present study were mentally preoccupied with their excessive hair growth which felt like they had no existence in this world. Almost all women said the facial hair was repetitively on their cognizance and almost two-thirds were each time checking in the mirror for hair. Affected women were ridiculed or pitied by others all time during work and become extremely self-conscious about their looks when meet with others; living with unwanted self-caused negative experiences for them which include low self-esteem, inferiority complex, avoidance, etc.<sup>2</sup> In study findings women reveal they experience that there is no importance of their

self in front of others. Majority of participants critically said; they were not treated as they should be. Four of them reported that they were treated as if they were small or useless. In some studies, experience of hirsutism with psychological aspects explores in the same group of participants.<sup>13,14</sup> Participants narrated that they had accepted themselves as they are or most of the time feel stressed that they can't do anything.

Living with excessive, male-pattern hair growth caused the women tremendous emotional distress and some women had suicidal ideation. It's deeply influencing people's experience of their bodies in a negative way and brings feelings of ugliness and unpleasantness which depresses their emotion significantly, all experiences related to the emotional problems were negative and they impacted the participants' life badly. This can be understood in the light of previous study.<sup>15</sup>

Women shared that physical problems are a more concerning topic for them because it's reflected in their overall appearance both internally and externally. Women also reported that their problems of excessive hair growth were caused by hormonal changes and they also faced menstruation irregularity with this factor. Another study results declared the same.<sup>16</sup>

Unwanted facial hair carries an excessive behavioural burden for women and represents a full-size intrusion into their everyday lives. Participants experience social problems like social phobia, insecurity in interpersonal relationships, shattered self-belief and worthlessness in front of the community due to this problem with psychological and emotional problems as well. A same study explores that issue.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the study results exposed numerous techniques women attempt to escape from their physiques, in which they felt trapped. They used various strategies

for hair removing treatments such as laser treatments, electrical depilation, waxing, and shaving could temporarily remove the hair without permanent results. Another way of trying to escape was to cover the body parts with garments or cosmetics.

## ■ CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study highlights that hirsutism significantly impacts women's self-perception, self-esteem, relationships, and quality of life. This emphasizes the need for healthcare interventions, including culturally sensitive approaches and early detection. Further research with diverse samples is necessary to validate these findings and understand specific influences like polycystic ovary syndrome.

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### Author's Contribution

MA and RJ jointly conceived the concept, gathered and analyzed the data, and authored the manuscript. TL contributed to manuscript drafting, providing technical review and editing support. Authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

### Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest

### Grant Support and Financial Disclosure

None

### Data Sharing Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.