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Filicide-Suicide by hanging involving an autistic child: A rare case report

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Abstract: Filicide-suicide is an area of growing interest in the field of forensic psychiatry. Using multiple media reports, the present report describes a case of filicide-suicide in Bangladesh in which a 55-year-old father killed his 14-year-old autistic son by hanging, and then hung himself. The main reason for the suicide appeared to be depression and stress as a result of severe financial problems. A case of filicide-suicide case involving an autistic child has never been reported in Bangladesh, and filicide-suicide by hanging is extremely rare.

Keywords: Filicide-Suicide, Child Autism, Hanging, Bangladesh, Case Report.

Introduction

In the field of forensic psychiatry, filicide-suicide has become an area of increasing research interest. Filicide is defined as the intentional killing of one's own son and/or daughter and in many of these cases, there is a suicide attempt by the parent following the filicide (Cooper & Eaves, 1996). If the parent subsequently dies by suicide, it is considered as filicide-suicide. Filicide is considered an extraordinary form of homicide (Putkonen et al., 2009). However, homicide-suicide is different from other forms of homicide because of its distinct features (e.g., victims being their own children, victims rarely being strangers) (Milroy, 1998).

One study in Chicago, US (Stack, 1997) analyzed 16,245 homicides and reported that 7.6% comprised homicide-suicides and 2% comprised filicide. The reasons for homicide-suicide include economic issues, job loss and/or other complex issues such as "*male sexual proprietariness and amorous jealousy*" (Lecomte & Fornes, 1998, p.760), and in many cases of filicide-suicide, the reasons are very similar. Moreover, many psychiatric disorders and affective disorders etc. are linked to filicide (Dil et al., 2008), and supported by some associated factors (e.g., previous accessing of psychiatric services, previous suicide attempts) (West, 2007).

The case reported here from Bangladesh was constructed using over two dozen media reports including international news agencies, national newspapers, and other online-based local news media (Table 1).

Table 1

Source	Language	Media category	Reported online	Link to the story
The Daily Star 1	English	National Newspaper	Wed Nov 11, 2020 10:44 PM	https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/father-son-found-dead-dhakas-moghbazar-flat-1993229
The Daily Star 2	English	National Newspaper	Thu Nov 12, 2020 12:00 AM	https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/father-son-found-dead-city-flat-1993633
The Business Standard	English	National Newspaper	Thu Nov12, 2020, 12:24 PM	https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/businessman-commits-suicide-after-killing-son-dhaka-156880
The World News	English	Int. News Media	Not specified	https://theworldnews.net/bd-news/father-son-found-dead-at-dhaka-s-moghbazar-flat
Shafaqna News	Bangla	Int. News Media	Wed, Nov 11, 2020	http://bangladesh.shafaqna.com/BD/AL/3462266
Daily Prothom Alo	Bangla	National Newspaper	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 01:37 PM	https://cutt.ly/IEQ1NyZ
Daily Samakal	Bangla	National Newspaper	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 02:10 PM	https://samakal.com/capital/article/201143070

Daily Naya Diganta	Bangla	National Newspaper	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 11:05 PM	https://cutt.ly/GWojM8H
Daily Kaler Kantho	Bangla	National Newspaper	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 11:40 PM	https://www.kalerkantho.com/online/national/2020/11/11/974796
Nagorik Barta	Bangla	National News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 04:55 PM	https://cutt.ly/vEQ1A7d
Bangla Tribune	Bangla	National News Media	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 11:06 PM	https://cutt.ly/7WojhQu
BD News24	Bangla	National News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 01:55 AM	https://bangla.bdnews24.com/bangladesh/article1825785.bdnews
Desh Rupantor	Bangla	National News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 03:00 PM	https://www.deshrupantor.com/capital/2020/11/12/258009
JAFB	Bangla	National News Media	Wed, Nov 11, 2020	https://cutt.ly/RWojxWg
Shampratik Deshkal	Bangla	National News Media	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 11:16 PM	https://cutt.ly/DWoj7xi
Bangladesh24	Bangla	National News Media	Thursday, November 12, 2020	https://cutt.ly/uWoj626
Jamuna TV News	Bangla	National TV News	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 11:20 PM	https://www.jamuna.tv/news/183257
m. priyo	Bangla	National News Portal	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 11:06 PM	https://cutt.ly/AEQ19BM
Satghoria	Bangla	Local News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020	https://www.satghoria.com/national/news/4105
Satkhira Probaho	Bangla	Local News Media	Thursday, November 12, 2020	https://cutt.ly/eWojKDP
Khulna Gazette	Bangla	Local News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 12:06 PM	https://cutt.ly/yWojVoP
Janatar Michill	Bangla	Local News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 06:05 AM	https://janatarmichill.com/?p=435
Gram Bangla News24	Bangla	Local News Media	Thursday, November 12, 2020	http://grambanglanews24.com/194204/

Daily Time News BD	Bangla	Online News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 07:46 PM	http://www.timenewsbd.net/news/detail/166903
Just Time BD	Bangla	Online News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020, 12:56 PM	https://cutt.ly/8Woj8Yd
News Zone BD	Bangla	Online News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020	https://cutt.ly/gWokrD1
Desh Barta	Bangla	Online News Media	Thu, Nov 12, 2020	https://cutt.ly/FWoky7w
24 Online Newspaper	Bangla	Online News Media	Wed, Nov 11, 2020, 11:03 PM	https://cutt.ly/gWoko9L
Crime Express	Bangla	Online News Portal	Thu, Nov 12, 2020	https://cutt.ly/kEQ1Zra

Case report

The hanging bodies of a father and his son were recovered from a five-story building in Nayatola in Moghbazar in the capital, Dhaka on 11 November 2020. The two bodies were recovered by the Hatirjheel police station that evening. The deceased was the father, a 55-year-old man, and his son, who was a 14-year-old boy.

According to police and local residents, the father lived on the fifth floor of the building with his wife and son. The wife had gone out to market at around 12pm (noon). The wife returned from the market around 2.30pm. When she got back home, she found the door locked from inside and she was unable to get in. Moreover, the husband and son did not respond to any of her calls. Neighbors then gathered following screaming by the wife. One of the building's security guards was able to unlock the door. Subsequently, the husband was found hanging from the ceiling fan in the drawing-room, and in the adjacent room, the body of the son was found hanging in the same way.

A police investigation confirmed the incident and said that on receiving information, they went to the site of the hanging bodies of the father and son, and recovered the bodies. The son was believed to have been hanged to death from a ceiling fan by his father, and then the father hanged himself from the ceiling fan in another room. No one was at home except for the father and son at the time of the incident.

The father was reported as having a mental health illness, and he was already receiving treatment from the hospital, and his family confirmed this. The father was a contractor by profession and had worked for the Ministry Road Department and also was involved in (an unspecified)

business but had not been employed for several months prior to the suicide. He was reported as being mentally disturbed due to the loss of a large amount of money in business and was suffering from depression because of this. He owed a few months' rent due to his insolvency, which intensified day-by-day. The father had also been physically ill for months because his health deteriorated due to his mental health illness and excessive stress over the loss of money. His son was suffering from autism and had speech and communication problems, and he was also unable to move properly without help from his parents, and consequently he stayed at home all the time.

Discussion

The case of the filicide-suicide has previously been extensively studied in the context of Chicago both from the late 19th to the late 20th century (Shackelford et al., 2005, 2008). One of these studies found no difference between genetic parents and step-parents in the rates of filicide-suicide (Shackelford et al., 2005) whereas a follow-up study found genetic parents were more likely to engage in filicide-suicide than step-parents (Shackelford et al., 2008). Another study examining filicide-suicide investigated seven cases related to the factor of separation/divorce among couples where disputed custody of children was the main reason for the filicide-suicide (Johnson, 2006). A UK study of 224 cases of filicide-suicide from 1994 to 2012 (O'Hagan, 2014) reported the main causative factors to be separation, divorce, and child custody disputes between couples. Another study reported that 50% of the perpetrators in filicide-suicide had previous domestic issues with their partner (Léveillé & Vignola-Lévesque, 2020).

A Finnish study (Kauppi et al., 2010) examining all cases of maternal and paternal filicides (N=200 comprising 56 neonaticides, 69 filicides, and 75 filicide-suicides) over a 25-year period (1970–1994) reported that maternal filicide (N=43) was more common than paternal filicide (N=26) in a total 69 different types of filicide cases. However, this same study, when considering the cases of filicide-suicide (N=75) found paternal filicide-suicide (N=53) were more common than maternal filicide-suicide (N=22). A review by West et al. (2009) analyzing 383 cases of filicide over a 50-year period (1957-2007) from 12 studies in eight countries (Canada, England, Wales, Fiji, Finland, Scotland, Turkey, and the US) reported almost half of all filicides were paternal filicides. More recent research analyzing 86 cases in England also reported fathers were slightly more likely (N=25) to be the perpetrators of filicide than the mothers (N=20) (Sidebotham & Retzer, 2019). The remaining cases involved both parents (N=8), an unrelated male (N=14), suspected close relatives (N=3), or the suspected perpetrator being unclear (N=16).

In a study investigating mental illness among parents committing filicide-suicide (N=45) in England and Wales (1997–2006), it was reported that the fathers were more likely to be the perpetrators (N=28; 62%) (Flynn et al., 2013). The study also noted that fewer fathers (27%) had mental

disorders compared to mothers (66%), and 31% of mothers received previous mental health services prior to the incident. Friedman et al. (2005) reviewed all cases of filicide-suicide cases (N=30) from Cleveland, Ohio (US) from 1958 to 2002 and found that fathers (N=20; 67%) were more likely to be the perpetrators. All previous research studies suggest that mothers committing filicide cases are more prone than fathers to different disorders (mental disorders, affective disorders, bi-polar disorders), psychotic illness, and previous experience of psychiatric treatment for suicidal behaviors (Pae, 2014), although fathers committing filicide have also been reported have mental health illnesses, depression, and psychosis (Friedman et al., 2005).

Approximately 40%-50% of filicide-suicides are committed by mothers (D'Argenio et al., 2013) and in relation to filicide, the literature appears to focus more on maternal filicide (West et al., 2009) and cases of maternal filicide over the last 20 years has been thoroughly investigated in developed countries including France (Raymond et al., 2021), and Japan (Yasumi, 2018), as well as in the developing countries such as Mexico (Rodríguez et al., 2021), and India (Gowda et al., 2018).

Research conducted on maternal filicide and its relationship with suicide has shown that depression was a common factor among all mothers, although other comorbidities (e.g., alcoholism, drug addiction) are often present (O'Hagan, 2014). A study of 36 cases examining filicide-suicide committed by mothers between 1990 and 2010 in Italy found that all the mothers had psychopathological disorders including major depression but only six of them had received earlier treatment (D'Argenio et al., 2013). Another study investigated the common factors associated with filicide-suicide among parents and found depression to be a major factor (Friedman et al., 2005). A recent study examined homicide incidents involving autistic children from news reports (52 cases identified over a 20-year period) and reported that the stress of caring for the child was the main causative factor for killing the child (Guan et al., 2021). Others have reported what they describe as 'altruistic filicide' in which parents think they are relieving their child from suffering in world full of pain (Friedman et al., 2005; D'Argenio et al., 2013; O'Hagan, 2014).

Past research studies examining filicide-suicides have also reported children as having disabilities and/or disorders (e.g., epilepsy, mental retardation, ADHD, autism) (Coorg & Tournay, 2013; Declercq et al., 2017; Guan et al., 2021; Palermo, 2003). One study focusing on all cases (21 news articles, involving 22 disabled children) between 1990 and 2010 in the US, reported 54% of the victims were autistic children (Coorg & Tournay, 2013). Another study noted that children with disabilities (in general) and children with autism (in particular) are the most frequent victims of filicide (Declercq et al., 2017). Other research analyzing the associated risk factors with filicidal behavior among families with autistic children emphasized the need for social and mental health support for parents and other caregivers to avoid burnout (Guan et al., 2021).

One aspect that makes the case reported here extremely rare is that both the bodies were found hanging from the ceiling. Although different types of methods (e.g., the use of firearms, use of knives, use of blunt objects, beating, drowning, stabbing, arson, and poisoning) have been reported in filicide-suicide cases (Friedman et al., 2005), hanging in filicide-suicide has rarely been reported in the research literature (Behera et al., 2015). As far as the authors are aware, the hanging of an autistic child has never been reported in a case of filicide-suicide. For example, recent research conducted on the incidence of filicide among 52 children with ASD as victims in the USA between 2000 and 2019, reported a number of injury methods including gunshot wounds, drowning, suffocation, strangulation, and asphyxiation (Guan et al., 2021), but did not include any incident of hanging among children with autism. Research also shows that in filicide-suicide cases, the victims of paternal filicides are significantly older than the victims of maternal filicides (Debowska et al., 2015) which is supported in the present case, where the child was aged 14 years as opposed to being an infant or below the age of six years.

Limitations

The major limitation of the present study is that all the data came from media sources rather than first-hand accounts. There is always the possibility that some of the information may not be as accurate as it could be and there is important information missing that was not in any of the media reports (e.g., how long the father had had mental health issues, what medications the son and father were taking at the time of death, etc.). However, the method used is becoming established in the scientific literature, especially in countries that do not have a national suicide surveillance system (Mamun & Griffiths, 2021), and the present case was not just from one media source but from over 20 different media sources.

Conclusion

The filicide-suicide case presented here involved a father with mental health problems caused by financial crisis, as well as the son having autism. The alleged causative factors have been identified in previous research (e.g., characteristics of the perpetrator [i.e., father being the only perpetrator] and victim [i.e., son having autism]; mental state [i.e., depression] and prior medication history [i.e., treatment for mental illness] of the perpetrator; age of the victim [i.e., older age, 14 years old]). However, the method chosen for the filicide-suicide (i.e., hanging) has not been previously reported and therefore makes the case highly novel. The present case indicates the importance of the mental health of the parents of autistic children. To prevent such cases, preventive measures have been suggested in previous research (Palermo, 2003) for reducing such cases. The prevention of filicide requires the combined involvement of multiple

stakeholders in order to succeed (Putkonen et al., 2009). Measures for preventing such filicide-suicides contexts would be effective if they are implemented properly (Shoib & Arafat, 2021), and the challenges are particularly salient given the complexities among families with autistic children.

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Declaration of conflict of interest

None.

Availability of data and material

All data were taken from media reports. All links to all the reports accessed were working at the time of writing.

Author's contributions

Naywaz Sharif Shubha conceptualized the study, conducted the literature review, and wrote the first draft of the paper. Siyam Hossain contributed to the literature review, data collection, data curation and reference management. Mark D. Griffiths supervised and revised the whole manuscript and as the principal investigator provided technical and conceptual support for the study.

Ethics and informed consent

Not applicable.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

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