

Solutions of Domestic Violence Against Women: A Focus on Saudi Arabia: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Domestic violence against women (DVAW) remains a persistent issue worldwide, surpassing cultural, religious, and socio-economic boundaries. While extensive research has examined this phenomenon globally, the scholarly literature on domestic violence in Saudi Arabia remains limited. Existing studies and international reports indicate that many Saudi women experience domestic violence in silence, often constrained by socio-cultural and legal barriers. This study examines the applicability of Australian policies and intervention strategies in addressing DVAW in Saudi Arabia and explores how Saudi Vision 2030 can serve as a catalyst for policy-driven reforms aimed at enhancing women's empowerment and Labor market participation. This research is grounded in feminist and human rights theoretical frameworks and employs a qualitative methodology based on thematic analysis of secondary data. The primary sources include reports from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), academic studies, Australian policy documents, and the Saudi Vision 2030 document. The analysis identifies three key policy interventions: (1) addressing socioeconomic inequality as a fundamental driver of domestic violence through primary prevention strategies; (2) developing inclusive policies that recognize the diverse experiences of women, including expatriates and individuals with disabilities; and (3) implementing a multi-sectoral response model that integrates government agencies, civil society organizations, and awareness campaigns to support victims effectively. The findings suggest that key elements of Australia's DVAW policy framework can be adapted to the Saudi context, contributing to the advancement of women's rights and improving their socio-economic status. This study underscores the importance of evidence-based policymaking and international best practices in shaping domestic violence prevention and response strategies within Saudi Arabia.

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Introduction

There are various types of violence across the world, but the focus of this thesis is on violence that occurs between partners, particularly men, toward women. Women are likely to experience violence from male partners rather than from strangers, while men experience violent acts from strangers or colleagues more often than from anyone close to them (WHO, 2017). Since an intimate relationship between these two sexes requires a marriage contract in Saudi Arabia, which is the target location of this thesis, this study focuses on married and divorced women. Therefore, it narrows the scope of the examined issue and uses the clearest term available to describe violence faced by women in a marital setting: domestic violence against women (DVAW). The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on domestic violence and its relevance to the research question. It features six sections, the first of which is the Introduction. The second provides various definitions of the DVAW. The third section explores theoretical developments, followed by the fourth section that discusses the effects and prevalence of DVAW in general. The fifth section highlights the Saudi context, including the prevalence of DVAW, effects of DVAW, women's social position, and risk factors for DVAW. The final section concludes the paper by reiterating the key aspects of the review. This literature review will therefore summarize the work that has been done in this area in the Saudi context to build on it, providing inspirational and beneficial additions to the matter and contributing to Saudi Vision 2030 in terms of women's status.

Definition of domestic violence against women

There is debate about the appropriate term to use when describing violence against women, so this section will focus on that point. This section discusses the most prominent terminologies: intimate partner violence, domestic violence, family violence, and domestic violence against women.

DV can be defined narrowly as the perpetration of behaviors directed towards another person that result in physical injuries, either intentionally or unintentionally (Lawrence, 2003), or more broadly, encompassing a range of behaviors that lead to bodily and emotional damage, including sexual crimes and threats of murder or physical attacks (Alhabdan, 2015). Domestic violence usually seems to exclusively include violence between partners and other types of abuse in a domestic setting, such as violence among siblings, violent parents against children and teens, violent teens against parents, and abuse against elders (MacDonald & Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre, 1998). However, family violence is a broader term, as it encompasses violence against any family member, in addition to violence between intimate partners (MacDonald & Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre, 1998). Family violence is the preferred term among First Nations people (MacDonald & Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre, 1998). It best represents blood relationships and extended family relationships within society (Cripps & Davis, 2012). In other words, the entire First Nation community is like a family, and thus, family violence covers violence among all members. Moreover, the term intimate partner violence (IPV), which refers to violence between any close person who causes physical, psychological, or sexual damage (WHO, 2012), appears in reference to violence that occurs between men and women, whether in a marriage relationship or not (Branch, 2010). Most abused women are exposed to violent behavior from their current or past partners (WHO, 2012). A clear definition of violence has been established by the WHO: Intentional use of physical force or power threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation (WHO 2002:38).

Nevertheless, it is claimed that this definition is not clear about ‘a gendered element of violence’ (Williamson, 2013). This criticism is levelled against the terms DV and IPV, which also do not include a gendered dimension. These terms ignore the gender context, indicating that men are usually violent partners, whereas women are usually victims (Abraham, 1998). Consequently, feminists have widely used the term

‘domestic violence against women (DVAW) from known men to clarify that the issue is rooted in gender-based discrimination (Elabani, 2015). Later, in 1993, The United Nations defined VAW as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

This definition is the preferred term for women in general because it was used as an umbrella term that defines any form of abuse used to create, implement or perpetuate gender inequality and maintain unequal relationships of gender power (Fulu et al., 2013).

However, DVAW can take the form of controlling behavior (WHO, 2012; UK Home Office, 2013), emotional and financial abuse (UK Home Office, 2013), threats, alienation, and intimidation of the victim (UN, 2016) as well as physical, sexual (UK Home Office, 2013; NSW, 2017), and verbal abuse (Elabani, 2015). Moreover, VAW includes violent honor crimes, postpartum circumcision, female trafficking, and sexual abuse from either an intimate partner or strangers (WHO, 2013).

However, the understanding of the present topic, DVAW (and its related terms, domestic violence, family violence, and intimate partner violence), varies across countries. However, the terms DV, FV, and IPV are usually used in reference to violence perpetrated by an intimate partner and may include violence towards children, elders, and other relevant family members (WHO, 2012).

In Saudi society, the location targeted for this study, males and females are not allowed either legally or religiously to live together unless there is a martial affiliation between them (Alhadban, 2015), so this thesis targets women who have experienced violence in a marriage, whether from a current or former husband. The term DV is commonly used to describe violence between intimate partners in a family setting, but it will not be

sufficient in this thesis as it lacks a gendered dimension. Hence, the term DVAW was used to clarify the gender dimension.

Theoretical Development

As the issue of DVAW has been revealed and examined, numerous theories have been proposed. These theories are categorized into four main schools: system, psychoanalytic, cognitive behavioral, and family and social theories (Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012). However, given that few studies were conducted in Saudi societies, the theories on which the researchers depended to reach clear interpretations of DVAW were limited or even ignored in the study papers. According to a recent systematic review of 16 studies conducted in Saudi society to examine DVAW (Alhalal et al., 2019), the majority did not rely on theoretical frameworks to analyze the health effects of DVAW, except for the chronic pain study conducted by Alhalal (2016). Feminism was mentioned most often, and feminist theory seems to be the most appropriate. It takes account of the social structure (Elabani, 2015) and uses patriarchy, particularly as it exists in Saudi society, to describe the imbalance of power between men and women that limits women's participation in the "social, economic and political structure" (Alhabdan, 2015). Feminist perspectives will be used in the current study, with an emphasis on their relation to the economic status of women. This choice was made to build on and complete existing studies in the Saudi context. Although it seems that most Western countries have eliminated social structures such as patriarchal structures existing in the Saudi region, which feminist theories argue are factors of DVAW, DVAW still exists.

As a result, to build on the latest theories used among studies in the Saudi context, the human rights theory will be used to examine the issue of DVAW, which is one of the recent theories used in Western regions. The fundamental concept of the theory of human rights is that certain rights exist for every human because of their humanity alone, which makes them necessarily ahistorical or transferable throughout history (Besson & Zysset 2012).

Effects and impacts of DVAW

This section discusses the health, social, and economic effects of DVAW, culminating in its prevalence in general.

Impacts of domestic violence against women

The effects of DVAW include lowered health safety, living conditions, and heavy use of medical resources (Campbell et al., 2002). A longitudinal study on DVAW in the U.S. found that abused women had a significantly greater chance of drug use, relationship issues, dejection, worry/neurosis, and smoking than non-victimized females (Bonomi et al., 2009). In general, DVAW is associated with many mental health conditions such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety, according to a survey conducted by Ferrari et al. (2016) in the United Kingdom on women seeking help from DV.

Given social and economic costs, the ramifications of intimate relationship violence and sexual abuse are profound and have ripple effects across society. Women may face loneliness, inability to work, loss of income, restricted involvement in day-to-day activities, and a reduced capacity to care for themselves and their children (WHO, 2017). DV has major economic effects, resulting in an increasing strain on the health system in the form of higher medical spending, as well as impacts on education, leading to further damage to the employment status and prosperity of affected individuals (Duvvury et al., 2013).

Prevalence of domestic violence against women

The prevalence estimate of intimate partner violence is 37.7% in the WHO South-East Asia region, which ranges between 23.2% in high economic countries, 24.6% in the WHO Western Pacific region, and 37% in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean region (WHO, 2017).

The existence of this phenomenon in rich countries implies that the issue is complex, as it means that the standard of living is not the cause. Approximately 35% of females worldwide have experienced physical

and/or sexual abuse from their partner or sexual harassment from others (UNWOMEN, 2019). In Australia, 23% of women have experienced violence from their intimate partners and 23% of women have experienced emotional violence (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2016).

Domestic violence against women in Saudi Arabia

This section reviews DVAW's prevalence, discusses the risk factors, and concentrates on women's status and the effects of DVAW.

The prevalence of DVAW

In Arab regions, official statistics on DVAW are not reliable, as there are few reports on this issue (Elabani, 2015). Usually, females are coerced by their families not to report the issue to officials so that they do not lose the financial support of their husbands (Kadiri, 2001) or because it is considered a private issue that must be solved inside the family home. As a result, the current literature tends to depend on scholars conducting studies to reach an approximate rate of DV.

The first and only study to use a systematic review and meta-analysis in this context, considering 29 studies from 10 Arabic countries and focusing on the health effects of DVAW on female victims in a clinical setting (Hawcroft et al., 2019), is worthy of discussion. The estimated lifetime prevalence of DV in Arabic countries is 73.3%, including 35.6% physical, 22% sexual, 49.8% psychological/emotional, and 69% to 97% control violence (Hawcroft et al., 2019). These percentages are high, and do not seem to represent the reality of Saudi society. The statistics that examine the issue of DVAW in Arabic countries are considered unstable because they do not consider slight differences among societies in terms of laws, cultures, economic status, and political stability.

In Saudi Arabia, the prevalence of DVAW across a lifetime ranges from 20% to 44%, reaching 59% in certain areas (Eldoseri, 2012; Fageeh, 2014; Bohlaigah et al., 2014; Abo-Elfetoh & Abd El-Mawgd, 2015; Barnawi, 2017; Abolfotouh & Almuneef, 2019). The average in most studies is proportional to the global rate, and in some studies, it trends toward the estimated rate for the Arab countries mentioned above. The most

prevalent form of recorded DV is emotional violence, followed by physical and sexual abuse (Tashkandi & Rasheed, 2009; Afifi et al., 2011; Fageeh, 2014; Barnawi, 2017; Alzahrani et al., 2016; Alquaiz et al., 2021) and some of them live with disabilities (Alhalal, 2016). Emotional violence was directly followed by economic violence in two studies (Barnawi, 2017; Abolfotouh & Almuneef, 2019). Women suffering from economic violence in a rich country is an odd matter. It is clear that there is inequality in financial resources within the family home, resulting in one individual having more advantages than the other, and thus, more power. Furthermore, no study has examined the relationship between DVAW and economic status in women. This gap must be considered in the present study.

Risk factors of domestic violence against women

According to UNICEF (2017), early marriage for females (before 18 years old) increases the danger that they will witness domestic abuse more often than older women, as they believe that violence is a common matter between partners; however, older women are highly likely to have experienced violence as younger women and are still carrying the scars. The decision to marry is managed by men in some male-dominated societies; therefore, DVAW is deeply rooted in the social structure.

According to a survey conducted in Egypt by Kaplan et al. (2011), patriarchal systems in Arab regions play an important role in men dominating women, including making their decisions and monitoring their actions, generally by limiting their mobility. According to a survey conducted on Palestinian physicians, Haj-Yahia et al. (2015) stated that patriarchal ideology is embodied in the beliefs and norms that justify male control in all fields and facets of society. These findings clarify that the level of education among abusers is not relevant, as male physicians expressed their acceptance of beating women for discipline based on their beliefs.

In the Saudi context, the most popular risk factors are the educational level of victims and abusers, spouse's addiction to alcohol or narcotics, experience of childhood violence, and economic status of the

victims. According to a survey conducted in the western region of Saudi Arabia by Barnawi (2017), DVAW exists more among younger women, women with higher levels of education, men with lower levels of education, husbands who are employed or in the military, those with fewer children, partners with many wives (polygamists), smokers and hostile husbands, men and women with chronic diseases, those with a lack of family income, those who have been married for a long period, and drug users (Fageeh, 2014). Interestingly, the two aforementioned studies (in addition to Shiraz, 2016) show that DVAW exists widely among unemployed women or those financially dependent on their partners (Fageeh, 2014; Barnawi, 2017), while others classify economic independence as a risk factor (Eldoseri et al., 2012; Alzahrani et al., 2016). The second part is unusual. One potential explanation for Alzahrani's findings (2016) is the process of data collection. The participants were asked to provide their personal information, such as name and contact number, which could be the reason why abused working women appeared more often. Unemployed women do not have financial fallbacks, so if their husbands found out what they wrote about the violence, they could be negatively affected by their partner, leading them not to tell the truth about their experience. In contrast, working women may feel more able to talk about their experience of violence, as their financial independence protects them and would allow them to leave their relationship in the worst case if their husbands are found out. Moreover, a possible explanation for Eldoseri's finding (2012) is that because the survey was conducted through the free healthcare system, the results may have been limited to wives from lower socioeconomic classes who are financially dependent on their husbands. Couples' struggles, male dominance, and alcohol and drug use among husbands are also classified as risk factors (Eldoseri, 2012). Moreover, having a large number of children (Bohlaiga et al., 2014) or abusers or victims who have experienced violence in early childhood are both factors associated with DVAW according to surveys conducted on Saudi women by Al-Faris et al. (2013) and Alquaiz et al. (2021).

Certain characteristics were widely found among some abused women, while the opposite characteristics were found among others. These

contradictory results need to be explored to reach a reliable interpretation. For example, employment and unemployment among victims need to be examined, and their effects on violence explored. Hence, women's status is the most influential factor in the DVAW.

Saudi women's status and recent improvements

Only 15.8% of working-age women join the workforce in Saudi Arabia (World Bank, 2019), although the proportion of females educated to the point of tertiary school enrolment is 70% (World Bank, 2019). The reluctance of women to work, despite possessing educational qualifications, deserves consideration. Hodges (2017), who conducted a study on professional Saudi women to explore the obstacles preventing women from advancing, found that the factors are organizational, cultural, and religious. WHO (2013) states that economic exploitation by an intimate partner occurs when the abuser has power over the victim's income and other financial resources. Given the terms economic violence and control violence, it seems that there is a potential relationship between DVAW and women's willingness to join the labor market. The silencing of Saudi society through gender-based discrimination in partner roles indicates the possibility of a relationship between the social structure of Saudi society and DVAW. Various studies have shown that cultural and social factors play a significant role in Saudi women's professional lives (Al-Ghazali & Sadi, 2010; Al-Munajjed, 2010).

However, the Saudi government instituted significant regulations and took steps to make changes in the DVAW. According to a report of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 2017), the Saudi government passed an act concerning anti-trafficking (2009), an act granting women the right to vote (2011) and drive (2017), an act criminalizing DV (2013), and an act granting some female personal identification cards (2015), in addition to editing the most important act governing the guardianship system for women (2019). When an act on DV was issued, the reaction was not positive. This indicates the need to establish further regulations and policies to achieve positive

consequences. Guardianship law was one of the most contentious laws in Saudi Arabia, requiring a woman to receive permission or intervention from her guardian (father, husband, or brother) in order to legally perform a number of actions (Alharbi, 2015), including those related to work and mobility. The consequences of this new guardianship law will appear over the next few years. These are great improvements in women's positions that open multiple wider fields for them to engage with and compete in, such as the labor market, and further regulations that support them in their new positions are required to ensure women's empowerment. Hence, it seems that women's social and economic positions are the greatest risk factors for DVAW; therefore, a study concentrating on these areas with suggested future policies will be worth exploring.

Impacts of domestic violence against women

In the Saudi context, according to Barnawi (2017), health or behavioral problems (72%), psychological problems (58%), and medical issues aggravated by abuse (32%) were the most prominent impacts of DVAW. Moreover, according to a study conducted on Saudi women to explore the health effects of DVAW, physical abuse was manifested through poor health status, high incidence of diseases, miscarriage, bleeding during pregnancy, increased body mass, frequent visits to the doctor, and medication intake (Afifi et al., 2011). The effects of DVAW extended to the victims' children and included nocturnal enuresis, anxiety, schooling delay, and aggression, according to Barnawi's survey (2017). Health impacts have been examined in most studies exploring this facet of Saudi society, but the indirect effects of DVAW need to be examined, such as economic aspects and, in particular, their significance for females. Fortunately, Saudi Vision the 2030s purpose is to empower women and increase their contribution to the labor market from 22% to 30% (Saudi Vision 2030, 2015). To eliminate the issue of DVAW and work with Saudi Vision 2030, further policies supporting women in joining the workforce are worth suggesting.

Statement of research

Research Objectives

1. Exploring the relevance and possibility of drawing off Australian policies and practices to stop domestic violence against women
2. Ways to bring about change through Saudi Vision 2030 in women's empowerment and Increasing Participation in the Labor Market

Research Question

RQ: What policies that encourage women to participate in the workforce and support their life safety and economic security can improve and assist them in Saudi Arabia?

Justification and Contribution of the research

This study's contribution is important because there is an urgent need for more research on the challenges and solutions regarding DV in Saudi Arabia. It is difficult to collect data on DV in Saudi Arabia because of the custom of maintaining privacy and confidentiality in familial relationships; this has led to the under-reporting of DV and, consequently, hidden from public view (Nahshal, 2013).

Changes are taking place, and the impact of these changes on women must be closely examined and scrutinized. Recent changes to the status of women in Saudi Arabia have also led to the increased participation of women in the labor market, which is a goal of Saudi Vision 2030. Saudi Vision 2030, launched in 2015, aims to raise the rate of women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30% (Saudi Vision 2030, 2015). It is important to highlight the increase in the number of female employees in Saudi society and examine the success of economic and social policies that support and encourage women to improve their economic status, leading to potential positive impacts on DV prevention.

In 2018, a report under the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) called for Saudi Arabia to establish and empower an

independent and impartial commission to assess the government's approach towards domestic gender violence and recommend policy solutions. This commission seeks to concentrate on policies that support women in achieving financial independence through Saudi Vision 2030 initiatives that aim to enhance the quality of life of all individuals (Saudi Vision 2030, 2015). However, this commission needs to be under the supervision of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as it will be more beneficial and accepted by society than commissions outside the region.

My study draws off the Commission's work, Saudi Vision 2030 programs, and the work of researchers in Saudi Arabia, and aims to make a valuable contribution to the field. Researchers and policymakers in Saudi Arabia can also draw on the development of other countries to make changes. Australia, for example, put into effect a long-term national action plan in 2011 to reduce violence against women and their children. This policy is implemented through four action plans that are based on each other, with one published every three years (Australian Government, 2019).

The recent action plan, which was issued in 2019, includes five national priorities: 1. Primary prevention 2. National Priority 3. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children 3. Respecting, listening to and reacting to the miscellaneous perspectives and experiences of women and their children affected by abuse 4. Reacting to sexual violence and sexual assault 5. Strengthening support and service responses (Australian Governments, 2019). I am interested in exploring the principles in this National Plan and examining the developments of policies and practices to support women, and prevent domestic violence, to see what would be applicable to Saudi Arabia. These principles of the Australian plan will be adapted to the principles of Saudi Vision 2030, in particular, The National Transformation Program, which plans to support women in the workforce and is the main proposed strategy to deal with and prevent DVAW in the present study.

Conclusion

This literature review aims to provide an overview of the expansive scholarship on DVAW, as it is one of the most important discrimination-based issues facing women globally. This review comprises six sections. First, it provides a short introduction to the phenomenon. Second, it provides multiple definitions of the issue: domestic violence, family violence, intimate partner, and domestic violence against women. Third, it reviews theoretical improvements in DVAW with clarification of the theories that will be used in the current study. Fourth, it discusses the effects and impacts of the issue, concluding with its general prevalence, which concentrates on the economic and social aspects of DVAW. Fifth, this review examines the DVAW in Saudi Arabia. This section reviews the prevalence of the issue in society, the effects of DVAW, the latest political improvements made in Saudi Arabia for women, and the risk factors of DVAW. Most previous literature contains quantitative studies, creating a real picture but lacking theory-based interpretations that link the problem with women's empowerment policies. The social positions and economic status of Saudi women need to be studied further to support policies such as those suggested in the current study. Hence, this literature review builds on recent work to eliminate violence against females by enhancing women's status and thus contributing to the achievement of Saudi Vision 2030.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no competing interests such as financial or personal relationship, regarding the writing of this article.

Authors' Contributions

The author designed the study, gathered the literature and wrote the article.

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