

REASONS BEHIND WOMEN TOLERANCE OF ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence is an issue of growing interest among scholars. Previous studies have shown that domestic violence against women is caused by many factors. However, empirical studies on the factors that influence the decision of women to tolerate abusive relationships are still limited. This paper discusses the factors that hinder victims of domestic violence from seeking help like conflicting emotions, maternal instincts, economic dependence, social pressure and family's dignity. These factors revolved around the victim's perceptions and their inability to control the environment. Understanding of these factors is important to enable government agencies and non-governmental organisations to channel much needed assistance to the victims. Failure to identify these factors may encourage more incidences of domestic violence besides failure to identify and help victims due to their reluctance to seek help.

Keywords: Abusive relationship; Domestic violence; Seeking help; Women

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence refers to a man beating a woman (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000) usually a husband who commits violence against his wife. Many researchers agreed that violence is not only related to behavior causing physical harm, but also covers emotional, sexual and financial violence (Aziz, Idris, Ishak, Wahid, & Yazid, 2018; Idris, Nizar, Rasip, Aziz, & Khalid, 2018). Many previous researches have examined the antecedents and effects of domestic violence, however, the question remains: Why do women stay so long in unhealthy or abusive relationships? Faithful wives will sometimes try their best to deal with their domestic problems using different ways. This may involve a long period before the right direction is found. Women will consider their options very carefully before coming to various life-changing decisions. They usually consider various factors and risks, taking a long time to make their decisions and exposing them to the dangers of domestic violence. If the woman refuses to seek help from others, it may delay them coming to a decision.

A study done by Leonardsson and San Sebastian (2017) found that most women (about 41.4%) tolerate abuse and do not seek help. External factors may also influence the attitudes of women from getting outside assistance to solve their marital problems. Some researchers (Ahmad, Driver, McNally, & Stewart, 2009; Loke, Emma Wan, & Hayter, 2012) found out that women facing domestic violence delay or are reluctant to seek help because of social stigma, marriage obligations, loss of social support and afraid of being ridiculed or ignored. Despite the many assumptions on why women continue to persevere in unhealthy relationships, there have been only a few empirical studies done to investigate the real factors behind such decisions.

This study aims to bridge the gap by developing a flexible conceptual framework highlighting the factors that may influence the decision of women victims to tolerate abusive relationships. The study proposes various factors that hinder these women from seeking help and to get out of these unhealthy relationships. These factors involve conflicting emotions, maternal instincts, economic dependence, social pressure and family's dignity.

2. FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN VICTIMS CONTINUED TOLERANCE OF ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

2.1 CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

Factors like hot-tempered husbands and substance abuse (Aziz et al., 2018; Idris et al., 2018) have been used to explain domestic violence, however, the question remains: Why don't women as victims just leave the relationships? Some believed that women as victims tended to worry about splitting up and they feel responsible for the split (Bagshaw, Chung, Couch, Lilburn, & Wadham, 2000). Victims are often afraid of the abusers, and they feel unsafe if they leave. Women also fear their spouses will be arrested that will lead to retaliation and increased violence (Baker, Cook, & Norris, 2003; Lotf Abadi, Ghazinour, Nojomi, & Richter, 2012; Rodriguez, Quiroga, & Bauer, 1996). They believe that exposure may lead to more violence (Bagshaw et al., 2000; Sukeri & Man, 2017). In most cases, the abuse continues after the relationships have ended. Previously, some researchers believed that women want the violence to end but not the relationship or marriage. As victims, they are usually worried about the various uncertainties such as the actions of their spouses (Naved, 2013).

Besides fear, some women remain in unhealthy relationships due to feelings of extreme affection for their spouses. Bagshaw and colleagues (2000) mentioned that some victims loved their partners and assumed that their spouses are not bad men, but they have bad temperament. Some researchers claimed that some victims are confident that their partner's behavior may change. They only end up in divorce if they have given up hope that their spouse will change (Bagshaw et al., 2000). In short, women who have conflicting emotions often refuse to seek help and would rather stay in abusive relationships, thus this study makes the following proposition:

Proposition 1: The higher the conflicting emotions of women victims of violence, the more tolerant they are of abusive relationships.

2.2 MATERNAL INSTINCTS

Married women with children will usually face difficulties in leaving abusive relationships. Some women persevere in an unhealthy relationship due to their maternal instincts. Victims often feel anxious about their children's well-being (Özçakar, Yeşiltepe, Karaman, & Ergönen, 2016). They try to protect their children from violence. They fear that if they leave the marriage, their ex-husbands will obtain custody of the children and they will be prevented from seeing them, and they are afraid of how their ex-husbands will treat their children (Bagshaw et al., 2000; Frazão, Silva, Norton, & Magalhães, 2014).

These women victims often believe that children need their fathers, and treasure family life with both parents. They do not want to be accused by their children of destroying the family and taking the children from their fathers. Some women tolerate abusive relationships to avoid family upheavals such as having to move house, children having to change schools and having to leave their friends (Özçakar et al., 2016). Some women empathise with their children and want their children to have both parents around as they grow up.

Many victims choose to remain silent and tolerate abusive relationship due to pregnancy (Rekovec-Felser, 2014). The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that, 4 to 8 percent of pregnant women suffered abuse during pregnancy and 3,000 pregnant women in US experienced violence involving an intimate partner. Abuse during pregnancy puts women at risk of serious physical and mental health problems (Bacchus, Mezey & Bewley, 2004). Babies also face risk of injury and death due to the violence. Some victims are afraid to leave abusive relationships worried of the prospects of having to rise up a child alone and being shunned negatively by friends and family (Othman, Goddard & Piterman, 2014). They are also afraid to seek assistance from the authorities that may lead to the case being reported to Child Protection Service (Bagshaw et al., 2000; Frazão et al., 2014). The risk of having the baby taken away from the mother is higher especially if they are unemployed and having financial problems. Based on the above, women victims may be willing to tolerate abusive relationships. Hence, given their maternal instincts, women victims may refuse to seek help and stay in abusive relationship, thus the following proposition:

Proposition 2: The higher the maternal instincts of women victims of violence, the more tolerant they are of abusive relationships.

2.3 ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE

Women victims tend to tolerate abusive relationships due to economic dependency. Some refuse to seek divorce or get help because they rely financially on their husbands (Ahmad et al., 2009; Ellsberg, Heise, Peña, Agurto, & Winkvist, 2001; Kubeka, 2016). Economic dependency can be defined as a situation in which a person depends on their partner or spouse for certain financial reason to the extent that the partners are able to exercise control their finances (Bornstein & Robert, 2006). Economic abuses can take many forms; interfering with a person's career, incurring credit card debts and withholding finances. This is more likely to occur when there is only one breadwinner in the family, often with sole control of the family's finances (Bornstein & Robert, 2006). They usually have various ways to exercise control by intimidating or threatening their partners (Aziz et al., 2018).

Bornstein and Robert (2006) confirmed that if the women are highly dependent economically on their partners, they are unlikely to terminate their abusive relationships. This is in line with a previous study which found that a wife who is more financially dependent on her abusive husband is less likely to seek help (Taylor & Tipton, 1999). Dhungel, Dhungel, Dhital, and Stock (2017) added that when women depend financially on their husbands, they are at risk of physical and psychological violence. Their study also found that the risk of abuse was higher for women who are financially dependent on their spouses. In certain cases, working women may still have to rely on their violent husbands to provide for their families due to them earning extremely low wages. This forced them to tolerate the abusive relationships.

DuMonthier and Dusenbery (2016) conducted a study of 120 survivors of domestic violence, and found that 94 percent of them had been abused economically. Economic abuse entails the abuser namely the husbands forcing their spouses to become economically dependent on them. In spite of being in abusive relationships, 85 percent of the women remain in the relationships. Salamone (2010) wrote in her article in Forbes, women who return to their

husbands were not able to be self-sustaining. They are unable to cope alone since they have depended too long on their husbands. Some women tolerate abusive relationships since they lack the means to obtain alternative housing, money and other facilities (Bell & Naugle, 2005). The problem is compounded if they have children; they are unemployed and struggling financially. They may not have anyone to turn to, not knowing where to go if they leave. This sense of helplessness may force them to stay in the relationships and not seek help. Thus, this study puts forth the following proposition:

Proposition 3: The higher the economic dependence of women victims of violence on their husbands, the more tolerant they are of abusive relationships.

2.4 SOCIAL PRESSURE

A community's cultural and religious values may allow for limited tolerance of abusive relationships (Abdul-Ghani, 2014). Some women may feel that to leave violent relationships is not consistent with their religious beliefs. Katerndahl, Burge, Ferrer, Becho, & Wood (2017) stated that religious considerations may hinder an individual's desire to leave an abusive relationship. In some cases, they are more willing to stay rather than end the relationships for fear of bringing shame on their families and possible rejection by their religious community (Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson & Johnson, 2007)

From the religious perspective, Muslim women specifically in Malaysia, see the problem as a motivation to surrender themselves to God (Abdul-Ghani, 2014). They see this as their fate (Othman et al., 2014). Some women misunderstand Islamic concepts like disobedience and *nusyuz* (to the male partner) often associating them with the wife's non-compliant attitude towards her husband (Abdul-Ghani, 2014). Some Muslim women may feel threatened by their husband claiming *nusyuz*. This concept has been spelt out in the Al-Quran in Surah An-Nisa' 4:34, 4:128 (Mamat, 2004). Deraman, (1992 cited in Mamat, 2004) stated that *nusyuz* might apply to both husband-wife, if they deny their marital responsibilities to the other. Cultural or social acceptance may influence women to stay abusive relationships because of the social pressure to maintain a "perfect" relationship.

Some women fear how people will react to their problematic relationships, they fear being judged, blamed or underestimated (Giles, Cureen, & Adamson, 2004). Walton (2012), stated that women who experienced violence involving their intimate partners are very careful about when and who they disclose this incident to, for fear of being judged by others. They need non-judgemental support, from their family members and friends. Since women victims who are facing high social pressures seemed reluctant to seek help and willing to stay in abusive relationships, this study suggests the following proposition:

Proposition 4: The higher the social pressure faced by women victims of violence, the more tolerant they are of abusive relationships.

2.5 FAMILY'S DIGNITY

There is a traditional belief that women are born to preserve men's dignity and their family. This is more obvious in male-dominated societies where women have less power to make decisions and lack financial freedom. The absence of these two tools for empowerment continues to hinder women to progress socially and free themselves from destructive relationships (Miller, 2005). In Muslim societies, it is often a taboo for women to seek divorce although allowed when there is abuse in the marriage. Women who remain in toxic relationships without seeking help are naïve. The institution of marriage expressed through the marriage contract has granted husbands with absolute privilege and control over their wives subject to cultural interpretations (Ahmad, Ghazali, & Ismail, 2016).

In conservative male-dominated societies, men and their families are deemed superior to women. Women who seek outside assistance are deemed disrespectful of the men's and his family's social reputation. This essentially may lead to heightened conflicts and loss. Women usually suffer more in terms of emotional and economic losses. They risk losing their rights and privileges in terms of wealth, custody of their children as well as being deprived of their homes (Baker et al., 2003). Since Islam promotes peace and discourages fighting, more religious women believe that it is better to be patient and to remain steadfast in abusive relationships. To them, this is a way to obtain God's grace and

befitting that as God’s servant, they are to be tested and to endure pain in expectation of rewards in the afterlife. It is important to preserve a harmonious environment for both families (including with the in-laws). This is considered a priority and a way to preserve men’s dignity in traditional and highly religious societies (Kamaruddin, 2009). Women may not realise this form of social inequality that deny their dignity as women. This is not in line with Islam’s great concern for gender equality when it comes to moral actions (Olomjobi, 2016; Bala, 2010). Thus, this study suggests the following proposition:

Proposition 5: The higher the perceived needs to preserve family’s dignity by women victims of violence, the more tolerant they are of abusive relationships.

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

Based on the literature review, the conceptual framework of this study is as per Figure 1.

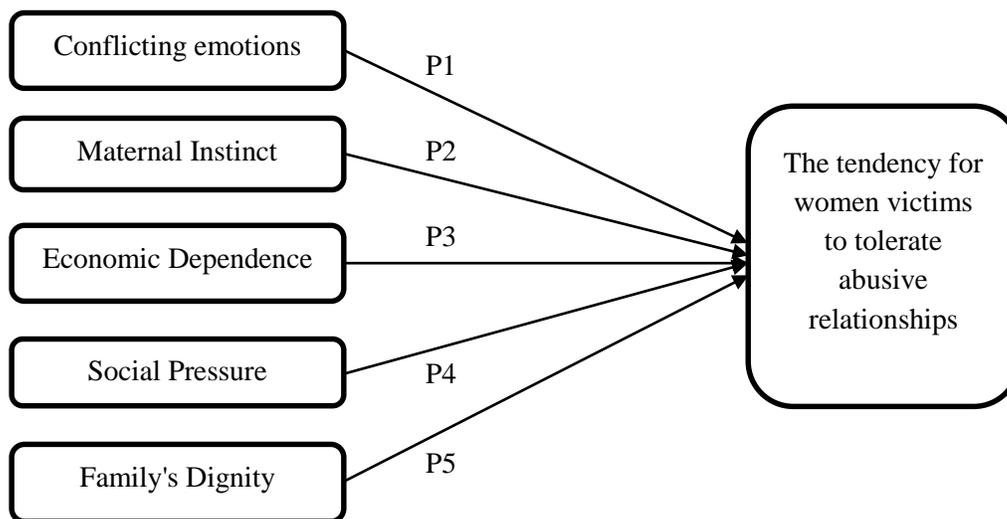


Figure 1: Conceptual model

As per Figure 1, it suggests five main factors that may influence women victims to tolerate abusive relationships. The factors are conflicting emotions, maternal instincts, economic dependence, social pressure and family’s dignity. For the purpose of this study, women victims with higher conflicting emotions, higher maternal instincts, higher economic dependence, facing higher social pressure as well as with higher perceived needs to preserve family’s dignity are expected to be more tolerant of abusive relationships.

4. CONCLUSION

While the government and NGOs are committed in helping abused women rebuild their lives after divorce, there are still some women victims who refuse to seek help and continue to tolerate being in abusive relationships. The question of why they are willing to tolerate these situations has not been empirically studied. This study tries to conceptualise the factors that motivate victims to persist in abusive relationships. Given their choice to remain silent and avoid seeking help may result in further mental, emotional and physical abuse. The conceptual framework proposed in this study emphasises the impact of the antecedents or independent variables (conflicting emotions, maternal instincts, economic dependence, social pressure and family’s dignity) on the dependent variable (the tendency for women victims to tolerate abusive relationships). The results of this study especially the proposed conceptual framework will add to the current body of knowledge in the relevant fields. It will also assist organisations in formulating strategies to help women

victims to get out of abusive relationships. Since this study is conceptual, future research is needed to test, analyse and validate the proposed model.

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