

## UNDERSTANDING THE ANTECEDENTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the factors that contribute to domestic violence against women. Domestic violence is a global problem that crosses cultural, geographic, religious, social and economic boundaries and is a violation of human rights. This article introduces a conceptual model involving the correlation of victims' and perpetrators' risk factors that result in domestic violence against women. Both of the Integration of Gendered Resource Theory and Cognitive Behavioral Theories were employed in this study to underpin the proposed model. The findings are important as this is one of the most recent researches conducted to investigate the antecedents of domestic violence against women. A novel proposed model makes a significant contribution such that it can be used as a platform for policymakers to effectively address the issue of domestic violence and work towards remedying the said issue. The major theoretical, empirical and practical contributions of this study are also discussed. The findings of this current study add to the existing body of knowledge in the area of feminist studies and will also be beneficial to academicians and practitioners.

**Keywords:** domestic violence; dysfunctional communication; perpetrators; victims; women

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is now considered as a global health issue (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010). It is defined as a threat or physical, psychological and / or emotionally violent act; that is, any kind of violence against others with the intention of injuring or demonstrating power and exercising control over them (Flury, Nyberg, & Riecher-Rössler, 2010). Some recent researchers (Chang, Lin, & Liu, 2017) stated that domestic violence includes physical, mental or economic harassment, control, threats, or other illegal attacks; and these violent acts are imposed on family members i.e. intimate partner, children, youth and the elderly. Meanwhile, according to (Women's Aids Organisation, 2017), the types of domestic violence include physical, psychological, sexual, economic or financial and spiritual. Its impact stretches beyond those women who are the victims of violence themselves, since it also affects families, friends and society as a whole. It causes a myriad of physical and mental health issues and in some cases results in loss of life.

In Malaysia, the statistical data reported the number of cases of violence against women showed increment annually at 40 percent rate, specifically from 3,488 cases in 2012 to 5,796 cases in 2016 (Women's Aids Organisation, 2016). In view of this alarming statistics, the issues of domestic violence against women are starting to get substantial attention not only from the authority and non-governmental bodies, but also from academicians (García-moreno, Claudia; Jansen, Henrica; Ellsberg, Mary; Heise, Lori; and Watts, 2005). Past researches have shown that the victims' risk (e.g., possession of resources, witnessed violence experience, personality integration, positive attitude toward violent behavior etc.) and perpetrators' risk (e.g., substances abuse, exposure to parental violence, gender ideologies etc.) are positively related to domestic violence against women. In further support to that, a number of past researches (e.g. Caetano, Vaeth, & Ramisetty-Mikler, 2008; Reingle, Staras, Jennings, Branchini, & Maldonado-molina, 2013) have also revealed that victims' risk and perpetrators' risk are positively correlated.

Despite the many literatures on risk factors for victims and perpetrators which have been widely explored for decades, some authors have drawn attention to the existing gaps related to domestic violence research. To date, the associations among victims' risk, perpetrators' risk and domestic violence have been researched in various hypothetical links. Many researches on domestic violence; however, have focused primarily on risks factor for either the victims or the perpetrators alone without assessing the overlapping relation between the two. Research area concerning this correlation has received little attention. The relationship between these constructs as a whole or integrated in a conceptual framework have also not been thoroughly discussed thus far (Reingle et al., 2013). Therefore, this study addresses this existing gap in the literature by developing a conceptual framework relating to the risk factors of victims and perpetrators that contribute to domestic violence against women.

Apart from that, studies that link the dysfunctional communication as mediating variable are also found to be lacking of substantial supporting claims or that they are being ignored in the more recent literatures. Dysfunctional communication is defined as the usual way to resolve tension as a coping method to defend oneself in a tense situation (Choi & Hyun, 2016). Accordingly, instead of merely assuming that either the victims' risk or perpetrators' risk is the only variable that has direct influence on domestic violence against women, the indirect effects, i.e. the mediator effects through dysfunctional communication may also take place. This means that the relationships between victims' risk, perpetrators' risk, and domestic violence could be more complex and might consist of intermediate interactions, such as the mediating effects, and thus warrant further examination.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to develop a flexible research framework highlighting the influence of victims' and perpetrators' risks on domestic violence through dysfunctional communication. In this paper, we developed a variety of propositions highlighting the risk factors of the victims and the perpetrators in influencing the dysfunctional communication and the possible effects of these risk factors on domestic violence against women.

## 2. ISSUES ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MALAYSIA

The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (Women's Aids Organisation, 2017). To strengthen the definition of domestic violence, the Malaysian government amended the Domestic Act 1994 (the principal act) by widening the definition of 'domestic violence' in Section 2 of the said Act. In short, domestic violence is no longer merely about physical and/or emotional abuse, a simple act of threatening to expose a nude photo of the victim on the social media is also considered as domestic violence (Buang, 2017).

In Malaysia, the statistics of domestic violence occurrences against women continues to rise in a concerning and in ever increasing number. A total of 57, 519 cases of violence against women were reported since 2010 to 2016, which include 23,212 cases (40%) of domestic violence involving women as victims while 28,365 cases involving child abuse (Bernama, 2017). Following these distressing numbers, the Malaysian government had taken the initiative to extend their protection by looking through a new dimension of the problem. Due to the numbers reported on domestic violence cases from January 2014 to January 2016, involving 2,651 male victims and 7,631 female victims, the Women, Family and Community Department considers violence against women as a grave issue, thus proposed a new law to provide more protection to abused victims regardless of gender (Buang, 2017). According to Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Chew Fun, the first amendment on the Domestic Act 1994 on Dec 21, 2015 and its enforcement on Feb 20, 2013, in short, is an effort to strengthen the Domestic Violence Act 1994 and was amended to improve existing laws and to maintain its relevance to the current situation (Bernama, 2017).

There are many agencies in Malaysia that are involved in dealing with domestic violence and provide protection to victims by providing immediate needs like shelters for domestic violence survivors, welfare assistance and other emergency support. The costs spent on domestic violence cases are huge because they would normally involve the costs for treatment, security and legal process. According to (Lim, 2017), domestic violence shelters are sorely lacking in Malaysia, which means that a devastating majority of domestic violence survivors do not have access to life-saving shelter services. The Malaysian government must allocate more funds to establish more domestic violence shelters and provide proper guideline of managing these shelters. In the long run, violence against women will impede the economic and social developments in Malaysia.

Over the years, Malaysia has developed its own strategies and plans to help protect women from violence by growing awareness on related issues of domestic violence, enforcing government developed programs including awareness campaigns as well as enhance legislation and education. These initiatives have helped not only the existing victims but also the general public to enhance their knowledge as well as to know their rights to protect themselves from violence. The above mentioned alarming statistics prove that it is important to continue sharing and publicizing the message of awareness in order to educate people about domestic violence and help in changing any misleading perception (Buang, 2017).

## 3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Domestic violence is not only against women (Coutinho et al., 2015; de Waal, Dekker, Kikkert, Kleinhesselink, & Goudriaan, 2017; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Khawaja, Linos, & El-Roueiheb, 2008; Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015) but men have also been found to be abused by their partners (Caetano et al., 2008; Reingle et al., 2013). A recent study (de Waal et al., 2017) found that men are usually being abused in public, while women are often abused at home. In their research, they also found that men are usually being abused by strangers but women are abused by their own (ex) partner. The current study; however, only focuses on domestic violence against women. In studies involving domestic violence, a few streams of published researches have evolved around the following questions: who are the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence? What are the consequences of domestic violence on the victims? What are the causes and risk factors that could lead to the occurrence of domestic violence?

The most popular stream of domestic violence research is related to the risk factors that contribute to the occurrences of domestic violence (Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt, & Kim, 2012; Flury et al., 2010; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Laeheem, 2017). Some studies discussed on victims' risk while others

discussed on perpetrators' risk. The next sub-sections discusses about both the victims' risk and perpetrators' risk that could lead to the occurrence of domestic violence.

### 3.1 VICTIMS' RISK

Generally, the previous researchers agreed in highlighting the main victims' risk is the possession of resources, which includes level of education, income and employment status. The two social structural views that are generally used to describe domestic violence against women are Resource Theory and Relative Resource Theory. According to these authors (Atkinson, Greenstein, & Lang, 2005; Cools & Kotsadam, 2017), Resource Theory refers to married men who have few resources to offer while for Relative Resource Theory refers to those married men who have fewer resources than their wives. On the basis of these theories, some studies proved that a low level of education has been identified as the primary predictor of domestic violence against women (Coutinho et al., 2015; Naved, 2013; Shuib et al., 2013). Some researchers; however, found that both women who are less educated and women with higher levels of education than their partners are more likely to be abused (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017). Their findings illustrate that there is no significant difference in the level of education of women with risk to become victims of domestic violence.

On top of that, Gendered Resource Theory has been widely applied to study how economic background related to gender roles increase women's risk for domestic violence. According to (Tokuç, Ekuklu, & Avcioğlu, 2010), some other risk factors for physical domestic violence are women's lack of financial autonomy and low socioeconomic status. A previous researcher (Naved, 2013) investigated the magnitude and nature of domestic violence against women and the factors related in urban and rural Bangladesh. He found that women in the lower income directly become economically dependent on their partners, which in turn limits their negotiating power and their ability to diminish physical violence. His study's finding is supported by a more recent study (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017) in which domestic violence against women is perceived to occur in all social and economic classes, but women living in poverty are more likely to experience violence because poverty is psychologically linked to stress. For instance, women in India who have a lower household income are at a greater risk of experiencing domestic violence (Mahapatro, Gupta, & Gupta, 2012). This finding; however, contradicts with a study done by (Rahman, Hoque, & Makinoda, 2011), who found that women's empowerment does not guarantee reduction in the risk of domestic violence against them. These inconsistent findings indicated that the relationship between resources and violence is not necessarily linear as increased resources could also lead to an increased chance of domestic violence occurrence against women (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017; Gracia & Merlo, 2016).

Furthermore, some researchers (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017) stated that the type of female occupation has a positive relationship with the probability of being abused. Scholars have recently argued that relatively less resources among women could lead to more violence due to marital dependency (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Some scholars agree that the status of housewives has been equated with female inferiority (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). On the other hand, relatively more resources among women could also increase violence due to the stress caused by status instability (Gracia & Merlo, 2016). Some researchers found that the victims were made up of those who are high-income earners (Khawaja et al., 2008) or at least have permanent employment status (MacGregor, Wathen, & MacQuarrie, 2016). The probable reason that has caused the perpetrators to commit domestic violence is because they use violence to gain obedience and compliance in the absence of resources (Atkinson et al., 2005) as they view it as a power base, which is as an alternative to material resources.

A recent study by Leonardsson and San Sebastian (2017) explains that children who witnessed violence among their parents can affect the positive attitude of women toward wife-beating. In other words, witnessing violence during childhood may result in women's acceptance of abuse (Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015). These findings have received widespread support from most scholars (Devries et al., 2011; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Khawaja et al., 2008). A study done by Khawaja and colleagues (2008) found that women show positive attitude towards the behaviour of wife-beating in eight different hypothetical situations, namely if women; (1) deliberately do not comply with what the husband asked her; (2) do not respect her husband's family; (3) go alone in public without being accompanied; (4) behave in a way that he does not like at home / in public; (5) "Talk back" or speak in a way that is hostile to him; (6) do not take care of the children properly (i.e., not in the way the

husband thinks it should be done); (7) incompetent in doing household chores; and (8) do not prepare food properly or in a timely manner. A study done by (Rahman et al., 2011) found that women's supportive attitudes toward wife beating reflects the belief that a husband is justified in beating his wife as she considers herself as a low status and economically dependent on her husband.

In short, by considering that women who have a low possession of resources and have positive attitude toward beating women as those who are at high risk of becoming victims of domestic violence, we make the following proposition:

*Proposition 1:* High victims' risk will be associated with higher levels of domestic violence relative to those with low victims' risk.

### 3.2 PERPETRATORS' RISK

Despite numerous studies on domestic violence victims (Devries et al., 2011; Flury et al., 2010; Lund, 2014; Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015; Shuib et al., 2013; Sukeri & Man, 2017), there are also some studies that focus on the perpetrators of domestic violence (Gil-González, Vives-Cases, Ruiz, Carrasco-Portiño, & Álvarez-Dardet, 2008; Gonzalez, Connell, Businelle, Jennings, & Chartier, 2014). These aforementioned studies have discussed in general the risk factors of perpetrators that lead to violent behaviour against women. The root causes of domestic violence for the three main races in Malaysia, namely Malay, Indian and Chinese, are hot-tempered attitude, misunderstandings, drug or alcohol addictions and financial problems (Johari, 2017).

One of the most common risks found in several cases of domestic violence is that the perpetrators were tested positive for drugs and/or were under the influence of alcohol (Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010; Fergusson, John Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Gonzalez et al., 2014; Mahapatro et al., 2012; Reingle et al., 2013; Zinzow et al., 2009). Some studies found that there are strong correlations between alcohol addiction, drugs and marijuana during the act of violence (Gonzalez et al., 2014; Reingle et al., 2013). These findings were supported by the research done by Lund (2014) who found that from all the cases involving body impaired and psychological violence, 61.9% of the perpetrators turn out to be abusing some kind of substances, normally alcohol or drugs.

Some studies link violent behaviour by perpetrators with their past experiences of being victims of abuse themselves, especially during the tender years of their childhood (Gil-González et al., 2008). These researchers found reliable connotation between the perpetrators' childhood experiences and the occurrence of domestic violence when they are adults. The probable reason is that children who have been exposed to domestic violence are witnesses or observers, which in turn increase the risk of behavioural problems during adolescence and adulthood (Duke et al., 2010). Similarly, in the research conducted by Zinzow and colleagues (2009), a child who had witnessed a violence act either committed by his/her own parents, in the neighbourhood or any strangers (especially chronic violence exposure) may transmit the risk for being a violent offender and engage in criminal activities later on in his/her life. Predominantly, ferociousness in childhood also usually leads to the growth of many hiccups in their early adulthood, such as interruption of education, abuse of substances, mental health problems, long-term employment, domestic violence or criminal behavior (Fergusson et al., 2005).

These findings are consistent with a study done by Speizer (2011) who stated that witnessing violence was associated with the positive attitudes toward wife beating among men. There are also other researchers (Capaldi et al., 2012) who found that the history of family violence becomes a risk factor for violent behaviour committed by African American males. Childhood experiences of violence in the home reinforce for both men and women the normative nature of violence, thus increasing the likelihood of male perpetration and women's acceptance of abuse (Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015). A recent study (Abajobir, Kisely, Williams, Clavarino, & Najman, 2016) highlighted that childhood maltreatment is a chronic adversity that is associated with specific and multiple forms of intimate partner violence and victimization in adulthood.

This study is also underpinned by Cognitive Behavioral Theories which was developed by Aaron Beck and focuses on how an individual perceives, interprets and processes the events that occur in a certain situation (Todd & Bohart, 1994). These theories state that individuals tend to form their own self-concepts in response to life situation that can give impact to their behavior. For the purpose of this research, two cognitive-behavioral theories are discussed, namely Social Learning Theory and Reactive Aggression Theory. First, Social Learning Theory is an approach to understand human behavior that has been proposed by several scholars. According to McShane and Glinow (2008), Social Learning Theory states that learning occurs by observing others and then modelling the behavior. People learn by observing the critical task model by others before remembering the important elements of the observed behavior. Then, they will be imitating and practicing those behaviors. This process of imitation can be seen in the development of language, aggression and moral-decision (Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012). This theory is one of the most popular theory explanatory perspectives in domestic violence literature. Albert Bandura, who pioneered this theory, stated that aggression is imitated rather than learned and it will be acceptable when the behavior is reinforced (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997).

Looking at this issue, perpetrators will model behavior that they have been exposed to as children. Violence is learned through the behavior modeling directly or indirectly provided by their family members. By observing family violence, an individual may use similar behavior when confronted with a similar problem. This learned behavior has been reinforced in childhood and then continued in adulthood as a method of responding to stress and to maintain control within their family. Similarly, several studies have found that perpetrators learned aggressive behavior by witnessing violence as a norm or experiencing violence in their family (Goldsmith, 2016; Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Due to this situation, children who witness the act of violence or the victims of violence themselves may increase the tolerance for violence during their adulthood. From a very young and mouldable age, they learned to view physical and emotional abuse as ways to express anger and solve problems with others.

Second, Reactive Aggression Theory focuses on emotional and cognitive process that leads to behavioral responses. Individual behavior is performed in response to the provocation experienced in an unpleasant environment (Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012). According to (Fite, Raine, Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, & Pardini, 2009), reactive aggression is linked with negative emotion experienced in childhood and adolescence. Reactively aggressive individual is at risk of possessing negative emotion including high level of sadness, unhappiness and depression. In this context, men mostly become perpetrators of domestic violence. Men who are involved in aggressive behavior tend to show more serious action that can lead to physical harm and emotional trauma. In addition, Hyde-Nolan and Juliao (2012) explained that when they face any social rejection, they are more likely to overcome their feelings with hostile action and thoughts about hurting others especially their spouses. From the three main theories discussed above, it is clear that domestic violence is a complicated issue to study and this research requires comprehensive approaches from community for some valuable implications. Therefore, this research deserves further investigation.

Another perpetrators' risk that was found to contribute to domestic violence against women is gender ideologies. This risk factor is somewhat less discussed in previous studies. Therefore, this study considers it to be a research gap that can be fulfilled and become the main contribution of this study. Gender ideologies are how one identifies oneself with regard to marital status which range from 'traditional' (viewed by the belief that husbands should be primary breadwinners and wives should remain at home) to 'egalitarian' (viewed by the belief that women's share in total household income is crucial). This factor is underpinned by Resource Theory, which has been refined to maximize the prediction that husbands' gender ideologies are critical, where the degree to which men assume the role of becoming a breadwinner for their family is important. Thus, gender ideology acts as a lens whereby individuals view their social world and make decisions.

In light of these views, Atkinson and colleagues (2005), who observed the husband's gender ideology and its relationship with women's share of household earnings, found that the women's share in total household earnings is positively related to the risk of violence only when the husband is traditional. From the view of Gendered Resource Theory, women who are primary breadwinners and who have traditional husbands are at the highest risk of violence. Structural explanations of women abuse from these resource theories namely, resource, relative and gendered resource theory emphasize violence as compensation for husbands' shortage of resources. These theories have received wide support from (Gracia & Merlo,

2016). From a social point of view, these theories state that men are the head of their family and have the power to maintain dominance in the family (Davis & Greenstein, 2009).

Considering the temperamental attitude, the effects of alcohol and drug abuse, as well as the exposure to parental violence and gender ideologies as perpetrators' risk factors that may contribute to violent behaviour against women, we thus make the following propositions:

*Proposition 2:* High perpetrators' risk will be associated with higher levels of domestic violence relative to those with low perpetrators' risk.

### 3.3 DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION

Many researchers also claim that victims of domestic violence are often comprised of those who have poor communication skills (Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015; Shuib et al., 2013; Walker, Bowen, Brown, & Sleath, 2015). The absence or ineffective communication between husband and wife significantly increases the likelihood of becoming a victim of domestic violence (Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015). A study done by (Choi & Hyun, 2016) found that dysfunctional communication may act as an intervening variable in the relationship between risk factors and domestic violence. It implies that improvement in communication skills can significantly reduce conflict and discrepancies and it may encourage mutual respect and equality in marriage, which in turn will reduce the possibility of domestic violence (Ghimire, Axinn, & Smith-Greenaway, 2015). This argument was further supported by (Walker et al., 2015) who suggested that better communication techniques are one of the strategies for managing the antecedents and triggers associated with domestic violence. Accordingly, the propositions were set up on the assumption that victims' risk, perpetrators' risk and dysfunctional communication would exert direct and indirect influence on domestic violence against women. Thus, this study puts forth the following propositions:

*Proposition 3:* Dysfunctional communication will mediate the relationship between victims' risk and domestic violence. Specifically, (a) dysfunctional communication is positively related to domestic violence; and (b) victims' risk is positively related to domestic violence.

*Proposition 4:* Dysfunctional communication will mediate the relationship between perpetrators' risk and domestic violence. Specifically, (a) dysfunctional communication is positively related to domestic violence; and (b) perpetrators' risk is positively related to domestic violence.

## 4. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

This study attempts to identify the antecedents of domestic violence against women. Each factor of domestic violence against women is studied using a detailed literature review and underpinned by Gendered Resource Theory, as well as Cognitive Behavioral Theories (Social Learning Theory and Reactive Aggression). The conceptual model proposed by this paper is presented below as Figure 1.

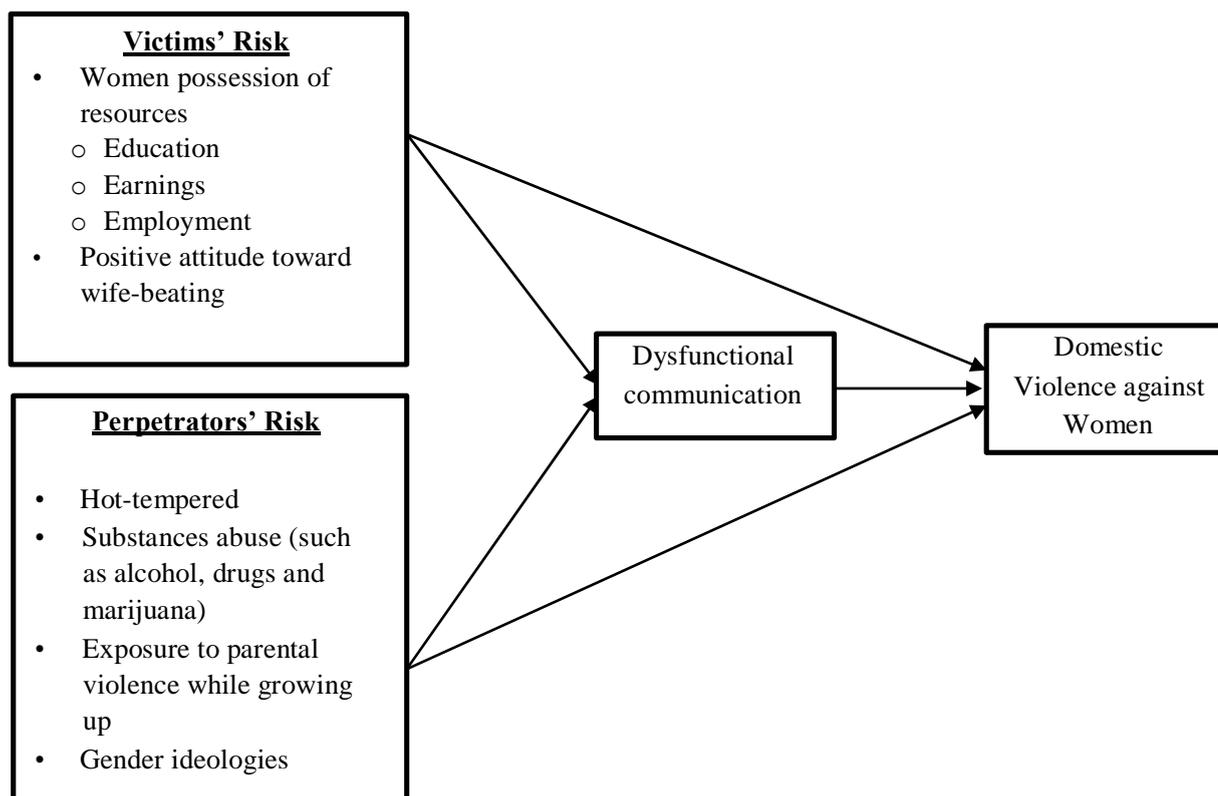


Figure 1: Conceptual model

As Figure 1 illustrates, the arrangement of the model suggests that there are two main factors that may contribute to domestic violence against women: victims' risk and perpetrators' risk. Victims' risk primarily focuses on the factors among women that are causing them to become victims of domestic violence. These factors are underpinned by the Gendered Resource Theory. For the purpose of this study, women with lower possession of resources will be considered as high victims' risk. In contrast, perpetrators' risk focuses on the factors of husbands or spouses that are causing them to behave violently against their partners. These factors are underpinned by Cognitive-Behavioral Theories (namely Social Learning Theory Reactive Aggression Theory). Figure 1 also proposes the indirect associations among victims' risk, perpetrators' risk and domestic violence through dysfunctional communication. This framework emphasizes dysfunctional communication as an intermediary between risk factors of victims and perpetrators and domestic violence against women.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Generally, there have been a tremendous number of written literatures on domestic violence against women. The integration of victims' risk and perpetrators' risk and how these factors may influence domestic violence against women are interestingly less researched by far. This study in particular attempts to fill the gap in the existing literatures on the direct impact of dysfunctional communication on the relationship between victims' risk, perpetrators' risk and domestic violence against women. There exists anecdotal evidence suggesting that if women are more independent in terms of the socio-economic aspect, they can earn more respect and appreciation from their spouses, which ultimately reduce the rate of domestic violence. In other words, women with higher level of education and are economically independent are perceived to magnify their negotiating power. Therefore, improving women's possession of resources may increase dysfunctional communication and reduce the risk of abuse. This risk factor should be an important objective for those responsible for reducing domestic violence against women. Hence, organizations should pay more attention on how to improve the value of women so that their contributions as family breadwinners are also appreciated and recognized by their spouses. This effort is essential in line with the declaration of 2018 as "The Year of Women's Empowerment".

Although this study makes progress to increase understanding of how victims' and perpetrators' risks may directly and indirectly influence domestic violence against women, future works should include moderation effects of cultural context because a multi-racial country like Malaysia undoubtedly has a diverse culture and certainly may further influence the mind-set of the victims and the perpetrators. The conceptual framework proposed above would be a starting point for conducting empirical research to further understand the issues related to domestic violence against women, especially in Malaysia. It will be an important contribution in the field of women and family literature as well as may assist the policymakers in formulating strategies to prevent domestic violence against women.

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