Staying Amid Struggle: Understanding Women's Decisions to Remain in Abusive Marriages and Counselling Pathways to Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence (IPV), a prevalent issue within marriages, can significantly disrupt the stability of the union and the well-being of the victim. This study delves into the experiences of women within the Malaysian context, who, despite being victims of intimate partner violence, choose to endure their unhappy marriages. The study's objective is to examine the experiences of intimate partner violence, the triggers that set it off, and the factors that contribute to women's decision to remain in abusive marriages. The study employs a qualitative approach, using a phenomenological design to delve deeper into the experiences of six Malay women who are intimate partner victims. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis to present the study's findings, which are crucial for understanding and addressing this complex issue. The results indicate that the triggers of violence were often rooted in financial tensions and child-related stressors. The types of domestic violence experienced by the study respondents encompassed various forms of physical aggression, such as slapping, hitting, and kicking, as well as psychological and emotional abuse, including verbal insults, threats, and controlling behaviour. The respondents' reluctance to leave these problematic marriages is influenced by their desire for their children to have both parents, their own experience of parental divorce, financial instability, family influence, social expectations, and the hope that their partners will change. In the final discussion, the pivotal role of counsellors in assisting women who face domestic violence issues but have not divorced will also be discussed, offering a ray of hope in these challenging situations.

Keywords: Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, unhappy marriages, counselling support, phenomenological study

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines intimate partner violence as "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship" (World Health Organization, 2012). Intimate partner violence (IPV) includes acts of physical aggression (such as slapping, hitting, kicking, beating), sexual abuse (such as forced sexual acts), emotional/psychological abuse (threats, humiliation, control, intimidation, insults, belittling), and economic abuse (for example withholding money, restricting access to work or resources). Intimate partner violence has profound effects on women's physical and mental health. Research has shown that different forms of IPV, including physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, are associated with adverse health outcomes. For instance, a study using data from the World Health Organization (WHO) Multi-Country Study found that combined forms of IPV, particularly those involving sexual violence, were linked to the poorest health outcomes, including increased suicidal thoughts and attempts (Potter et al., 2021). Another study highlighted that IPV contributes to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and low self-esteem (Karakurt, Smith & Whiting, 2014). Additionally, research has indicated that the type of intimate partner relationship influences the severity of emotional and physical impacts, with current partners more likely to inflict physical violence compared to former partners (Blom, et al., 2024).

Intimate partner violence within marital relationships remains a pervasive and deeply rooted issue affecting women worldwide. It encompasses a range of abusive behaviors, physical, emotional, psychological, and financial, that one partner uses to exert power and control over the other. While significant attention has been given to the consequences of domestic violence and efforts to empower survivors to leave abusive relationships, less emphasis has been placed on understanding the lived experiences of women who, despite enduring persistent abuse, choose to remain in their marriages (Stubbs & Szoeke, 2021).

Complex personal, cultural, and socioeconomic factors often shape the decision to stay in an unhappy or violent marriage. For some women, the desire to preserve the family unit for the sake of their children, fear of financial insecurity, social stigma, or the hope for change in their partner's behavior can outweigh the perceived benefits of leaving (Heron, et al., 2022; Edwards & Neal, 2017; Hellemans, Loeys, Buysse & De Smet, 2015; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Ahmadabadi, et al., 2017; Postmus, et al., 2018; Ghani, Ahmad & Mohamad, 2020). These considerations are often intertwined with the emotional and psychological toll of abuse, making the path to autonomy and safety far more complicated than commonly perceived.

This study seeks to explore the experiences of women who have been victims of domestic violence but have chosen to remain in their marriages. It aims to understand the types of abuse endured, the triggers that escalate violence, and the factors that shape the decision of these women to stay in abusive marriages. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design, this study centers the voices of these women, offering insights into their inner worlds and the rationale behind their decisions. The findings are intended to inform counsellors, social workers, and policymakers on the nuanced needs of women in abusive relationships who have not separated from their partners, and to underscore the importance of empathetic and culturally sensitive support systems in addressing this multifaceted issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Domestic violence is a global concern that significantly affects women's safety, autonomy, and psychological well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 1 in 3 women globally have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, often with long-term consequences on their physical and mental health (WHO, 2021). Within the context of marriage, domestic violence not only jeopardizes the stability of the marital union but also disrupts the victim's overall quality of life, self-esteem, and sense of security (Ali & Naylor, 2013).

Reasons Women Stay in Abusive Marriages

Although conventional narratives often focus on encouraging victims to leave abusive relationships, research highlights that complex and deeply personal factors frequently influence the decision to stay. Studies have shown that many women remain in violent marriages for the sake of their children, believing that a two-parent household, even if dysfunctional, is preferable to a broken family (Anderson et al., 2003; Heron et al., 2022; Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009; Serrano, 2021). Others report fear of financial instability, social stigma, religious obligations, or emotional attachment as key reasons for enduring the abuse (Bui & Morash, 1999; Ahmad et al., 2009; Heron et al., 2022; Ghani, Ahmad & Mohamad, 2020).

The experience of parental divorce also plays a role in shaping women's decisions to remain in their marriages. Women who grew up in divorced households may internalize fears of repeating a cycle of family breakdown, leading them to tolerate abuse in the hopes of preserving the family unit (Murray et al., 2006; Cervantes & Sherman, 2021). Additionally, some women hold onto the hope that their husbands will change, particularly if there are intermittent periods of remorse or improved behavior from the abuser (Heron et al., 2022; Walker, 1979).

Triggers and Forms of Abuse

Literature identifies common triggers of domestic violence, including financial stress, disagreements over parenting, substance abuse, and power imbalances in the relationship (Jewkes, 2002). Financial issues are frequently cited as a significant source of conflict that can escalate into physical or emotional abuse. The forms

of violence experienced by women range from physical aggression, such as hitting or pushing, to more insidious forms of psychological abuse, such as humiliation, control, and emotional manipulation (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Stiller et al., 2022).

The Role of Counsellors and Support Systems

Professional counselling has been recognised as a crucial intervention for women in abusive marriages, especially for those who are not ready or able to leave. Counsellors can provide a safe space for victims to process their experiences, build self-awareness, and explore options without judgment. Moreover, culturally competent counselling approaches must respect women's values, beliefs, and lived realities from diverse backgrounds (Bent-Goodley, 2005). A supportive counselling environment can empower women to regain agency in their lives, whether that involves leaving the relationship or finding safer ways to cope.

Counsellors play a critical role in supporting female survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) by addressing the complex and long-lasting physical and psychological effects of abuse (Karakurt et al., 2022). Given the significant impact of IPV on mental health, safety, and overall well-being, counsellors are central in implementing and guiding psycho-social interventions that aim to reduce anxiety, depression, stress, and the risk of further violence. Findings from a recent systematic review and meta-analysis indicate that various interventions show promising results in improving outcomes such as safety, social support, self-esteem, and stress management (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2022; Galovski et al., 2022; Craven et al., 2023). Counsellors not only offer emotional support but also help clients build empowerment and resilience, which are especially crucial in treating depression and PTSD, two prevalent and difficult-to-treat consequences of IPV. By fostering a safe and trusting therapeutic environment, counsellors help survivors regain control, rebuild self-efficacy, and improve their quality of life (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2022; Craven et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of women who remain in marriages despite being victims of domestic violence. The phenomenological design was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of the participants' experiences, focusing on how they perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their situations (Pilarska, 2021).

Research Design

Phenomenology is rooted in the belief that reality is constructed through individual experiences and perceptions. This approach is appropriate for studying domestic violence survivors, as it allows for the exploration of deeply personal narratives that may not be adequately captured through quantitative measures (Oliveira et al., 2015). By focusing on the participants' voices, this study aimed to uncover common themes and patterns reflecting the essence of their shared experiences (Rowtham, 2022).

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of women who remain in abusive marriages. Rooted in Edmund Husserl's philosophical traditions and further developed by scholars like Amedeo Giorgi, descriptive phenomenology seeks to understand phenomena as they are perceived by individuals without preconceived theories or assumptions (Giorgi, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology is particularly suited for examining sensitive and complex issues such as domestic violence, where personal narratives provide profound insights into individuals' experiences. Focusing on participants' descriptions allows researchers to uncover the essence of experiences that might not be fully captured through quantitative methods. For instance, a study by Oliveira et al. (2015) utilized phenomenological methods to delve into women's perceptions of domestic violence, highlighting the depth and nuance that such an approach can reveal (Oliveira et al., 2015).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with specific inclusion criteria: women who have

experienced domestic violence within marriage, are currently still in the relationship, and are willing to share their experiences. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit additional participants through referrals from initial respondents. Six women, aged 24 to 28, participated in the study and had various socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a safe and private setting. Interviews were guided by an interview protocol focusing on key areas such as the nature of abuse, triggers of violence, coping strategies, reasons for remaining in the marriage, and perspectives on seeking help. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined the data's analysis using thematic analysis. The process involved six key steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This process identified recurring patterns and significant narratives, capturing the essence of the participants' experiences.

RESULTS

Participants' Profile

Six married women participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 24 to 28, reflecting a relatively young demographic group. In terms of educational background, half of the respondents held a bachelor's degree (Participants 2, 3, and 6), while the remaining had either completed SPM (Participants 1 and 4) or obtained a diploma (Participant 5). Their occupations varied, with two as homemakers and the rest employed in different sectors, including government and the private sector. The number of years married ranged from three to seven years, indicating early to mid-stage marital relationships. Spouses were employed across various sectors, including self-employed, government and private industry. Most participants (five out of six) had children, ranging from one to two, except for Participant 2, who reported having no children. The respondents represent various educational levels, occupational backgrounds, and family structures, providing a comprehensive view of young married women in varying socio-economic contexts (Table 1).

TABLE 1PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

Participant	Age	Highest Education	Occupation	Years Married	Spouse Occupation	No of children
1	24	SPM	Homemaker	7	Private sector employee	2
2	25	Bachelor's degree	Private sector employee	5	Self-employed	0
3	25	Bachelor's degree	Government sector employee	3	Private sector employee	2
4	28	SPM	Homemaker	4	Private sector employee	1

5	27	Diploma	Service sector worker	6	Self-employed	2
6	28	Bachelor's degree	Government sector employee	6	Government sector employee	2

Types of Interpersonal Violence Experienced

This study revealed that all participants had experienced physical violence from their respective spouses. The forms of violence reported include slapping, punching, kicking, choking, and the use of objects to inflict harm. These acts were often triggered during interpersonal conflicts and arguments between the participants and their husbands.

Slapping

Participants 1, 2, and 3 described being slapped by their husbands during quarrels. Participant 1 shared that her husband often responded aggressively during disagreements, *"We were arguing, though I cannot recall the reason. He slapped me and then dragged me, pulling my hair."* Participant 2 described her husband as having difficulty managing his temper during conflicts, resulting in repeated instances of physical violence, *"One day, he slapped my face. I could not take it anymore. He often raises his hands against me."* She further explained that physical assaults would typically leave visible bruises, *"sometimes there were bruises on my arms and cheeks."*

Similarly, participant 3 reported frequent physical assaults involving slaps, pushing, and hitting, particularly during misunderstandings, *"He would go into a rage as if there was no solution at all, then he slapped me."* The participant expressed profound emotional distress when recalling an incident that occurred during her pregnancy, *"I remember he slapped me. I was deeply hurt because I was heavily pregnant at the time. Then he treated me like that. My heart was shattered."* Participant 3 also described her husband as short-tempered and unable to regulate his emotions when angered.

Punching

Participants 4 and 6 reported being punched by their husbands during violent episodes. Participant 4 shared that her husband frequently used physical force, including punching, kicking, and using objects such as a broom to inflict harm, *"He often punched me, kicked me, sometimes used a room…"* In one incident, she suffered a serious injury when her husband threw a piece of broken glass at her, causing a deep wound on her arm that required stitches. Due to the visible injury, she avoided contact with others, *"I once had a deep cut on my arm because he threw shattered glass at me. I needed stitches. After that, I did not visit my mother's house for a long time."* Although she attempted to defend herself, her efforts were often unsuccessful due to her physical limitations, *"Sometimes I tried to fight back. I once tried to hit him, but he dodged, and I got hit instead."*

Participant 6 recalled a particularly traumatic episode in which she was punched with great force by her husband, *"He once punched me very hard one night. That was the worst physical abuse he ever committed against me, and it was the first time it happened."* She also described being repeatedly hit on the head, including forceful tapping during conversations, *"He always hit me on the head…"* Due to the injuries sustained, participant 6 had to treat her wounds independently without external medical support.

Kicking and Choking

Participant 5 experienced consistent patterns of physical aggression, including being kicked and choked by her husband during conflicts. Initially, the abuse began verbally but escalated into physical violence over time, *"At*

first, he would verbally abuse me, but over time, he started getting physical—he kicked me, choked me. I became increasingly afraid of him." The participant expressed fear for her safety and concern that her husband might seriously harm her in the future if he lost control. She recounted how even minor issues would escalate to severe physical acts, *"Even small matters would be blown out of proportion. He would yell at me, choke me…"* Due to the recurring abuse, participant 5 became increasingly self-conscious and attempted to conceal the bruises on her body to avoid social stigma, *"Most of the bruises I tried to cover as much as possible. I did not want others to know my marriage was like this. I felt ashamed, especially when I saw how happy my friends seemed with their partners, and I was being treated like this."*

Triggers Factors

Financial Strain and Marital Discord

Financial instability emerged as a significant contributor to marital conflict and instances of abuse among the participants. The narratives of Respondents 1, 3, 5, and 6 highlighted how financial hardship and disagreements surrounding money management intensified tensions within the household and often triggered aggressive behaviours from their spouses.

Respondent 1 expressed deep concerns regarding the legitimacy of her husband's income, suspecting that it was obtained unlawfully. This suspicion led to feelings of unease and moral conflict, particularly when accepting financial support. She shared that any attempt to question her husband about the source of the funds would provoke verbal and physical aggression, stating, *"Whenever I raised concerns or questioned him, he would respond by slapping me and yelling."* This illustrates how the lack of financial transparency can erode trust and precipitate abuse within the marital relationship.

Respondent 3, on the other hand, reported that her husband's ego prevented him from accepting her financial contributions to the family, despite their ongoing economic struggles. Her willingness to support the household financially was consistently rejected, and any discussions about money or efforts to assist were met with hostility. She explained, *"He has a problem whenever I try to discuss finances. It triggers his aggression and leads to verbal abuse."* Her account underscores how rigid gender roles and fragile masculinity surrounding financial provision can escalate conflict and abuse.

Respondent 5 experienced a gradual withdrawal of financial responsibility by her husband, who began exhibiting controlling behaviours regarding household expenses. She observed a shift in his attitude, noting, *"He became stingy. He used to be supportive, but now he argues when I buy groceries or ask to go out."* This financial neglect was accompanied by emotional and verbal abuse, particularly when she raised concerns about the family's needs: *"When I mention groceries, he yells and scolds me, as if I am a burden to him."* Her experience reflects how financial control can be used as a form of coercion and emotional abuse.

Respondent 6 reported a complete cessation of financial support following the discovery of her husband's extramarital affair. She stated that after she confronted him, he began distancing himself from his responsibilities: *"Since I found out about the affair, he slowly stopped providing for the family."* The lack of financial support became a recurring source of conflict, particularly when she attempted to hold him accountable: *"When I bring up the money issues and how everything is on me, it always ends in a fight."* Her narrative demonstrates how financial abandonment can serve as a retaliatory act following marital disputes, further deepening the cycle of abuse.

Collectively, these accounts emphasize the multifaceted nature of financial abuse, which may include withholding financial resources, refusal to contribute to household expenses, financial manipulation, or using money as a means of control and punishment. Such dynamics not only exacerbate stress within the marital relationship but also contribute to the emotional and physical vulnerability of the women involved.

Child-Related Conflict and Aggressive Behavior

Issues surrounding children, whether related to the inability to conceive or parenting responsibilities, were identified as another key factor contributing to marital discord and abuse. The experiences of Respondents 2 and 4 revealed how tensions regarding children served as a flashpoint for aggression from their spouses.

Respondent 2 disclosed that repeated conflict in her marriage stemmed from their ongoing struggles with infertility. Her husband appeared to internalize societal pressures and comparisons with peers who had children, leading him to project blame onto her. She reflected, *"Maybe he sees his friends who just got married already have children. We have been married five years and still have none…"* Her husband's frustration manifested in persistent verbal abuse, particularly during arguments concerning their inability to conceive. This experience highlights the gendered burden placed on women in reproductive matters and how societal expectations regarding childbearing can exacerbate stress and conflict within marriage.

In contrast, Respondent 4 described the deterioration of her marital relationship following the birth of their first child. Her husband became increasingly irritable and aggressive, particularly when the child cried or behaved disruptively. She recounted incidents of physical abuse and threats, stating, *"He would kick me if I failed to quiet the baby. He would shout, curse, and threaten to do something if the baby cried again."* Furthermore, she noted a marked emotional withdrawal on her husband's part, reflecting a lack of paternal engagement and support. This pattern illustrates how parenting stress, particularly when coupled with a lack of coping skills or emotional regulation, can become a trigger for abuse in already-strained relationships.

These narratives reflect the complex ways in which issues related to children, whether their absence or presence, can strain a marital relationship and contribute to cycles of abuse. They also underscore the need for greater awareness and support for couples experiencing fertility challenges or parenting stress, particularly within cultural contexts where parenthood is strongly tied to marital success and identity.

Reasons for Staying in Abusive Marriages

Thematic analysis identified four core themes: (1) Protection and Prioritization of Children, (2) Family Influence and Social Expectations, (3) Financial Dependence and Economic Vulnerability, and (4) Hope and Denial Regarding Spouse's Behaviour. These themes offer insights into the interplay of psychological, relational, cultural, and economic forces that contribute to the persistence of abusive marital dynamics.

Protection and Prioritization of Children

Motherhood emerged as a deeply rooted driver of women's decisions to stay. For many participants, the perceived welfare of their children overshadowed their suffering. Their maternal role was intertwined with a protective instinct, motivating them to endure abuse in order to maintain a two-parent household and ensure their children's emotional and physical well-being.

Participant 1 shared her fear of losing custody, explaining how her husband had threatened to take the children away if she ever tried to leave. She described, "*He said he would disappear with them if I ever tried to leave*," revealing how custody threats were used as a form of psychological control. The influence of personal childhood experiences also surfaced. Participant 3 reflected on her past, stating, "*I know how painful it is when parents separate. I do not want my children to go through that,"* highlighting how early life experiences informed her sacrifices in adulthood.

Despite recognizing their husbands' abusive behaviour, several women still emphasized the importance of maintaining the father's presence in their children's lives. Participant 5 admitted, "*My children love their father, even though he mistreats me*," underscoring a complex emotional negotiation between maternal sacrifice and self-preservation. These accounts suggest that caregiving and maternal identity are central in the decision to remain.

Family Influence and Social Expectations

Participants highlighted the strong influence of familial and societal expectations in shaping their endurance in marriage. In collectivist societies like Malaysia, marriage was described as a union between two families rather than merely two individuals. This interdependence created pressure to preserve marital harmony at all costs.

Participant 6 explained, "*Our families are very close. They were the ones who matched us. Leaving would affect everyone*," illustrating how maintaining family ties often superseded personal well-being. Similarly, Participant 2 expressed a deep sense of duty to her parents, stating, "*I do not want to embarrass my parents. They have done so much for me*."

Traditional gender roles reinforced ideas that women should be resilient, patient, and sacrificial within marriage. Extended family members often discouraged divorce, directly or subtly, further entrenching women's sense of obligation. These narratives illustrate how social scripts around marriage and womanhood act as invisible chains, binding women to abusive relationships not out of ignorance or weakness, but due to deeply ingrained sociocultural expectations.

Financial Dependence and Economic Vulnerability

Financial instability emerged as a significant barrier to leaving abusive relationships. Participants who lacked stable employment or financial assets often perceived themselves as incapable of independently supporting their children. Participant 4, who tried to create income through small online sales, shared, "*I sell small items online, but it is not enough to support the children*," highlighting how economic insufficiency limited her options. She also expressed concern about burdening her aging mother, saying, "*My mother is old. I do not want to trouble her with my problems*," illustrating how limited social support compounded her vulnerability.

Women who had spent years as homemakers or lacked formal education reported diminished self-confidence and perceived employability. Economic dependence was thus not just a practical limitation but also a psychological barrier, reinforcing cycles of entrapment within abusive marriages.

Hope and Denial Regarding Spouse's Behaviour

Hope for positive change in their husbands' behaviour emerged as an emotionally complex but powerful theme. Many participants clung to the belief that the abuse was situational or temporary rather than reflective of their spouse's true character. Participant 2 rationalized, "*I still believe he will change. I think he is just under too much stress*," attributing the abuse to external pressures rather than intrinsic flaws. Similarly, Participant 3 recalled happier times, saying, "*He was not always like this. Work pressure changed him*," revealing how nostalgic memories fostered a hope for reconciliation. Such expressions illustrate how emotional attachment, combined with denial and minimization of the abuse, sustained the women's commitment to their marriages despite the persistent harm.

Such narratives reveal how cycles of abuse are maintained through intermittent reinforcement, where brief episodes of kindness or remorse from the abuser renew the victim's hope for reconciliation. These cognitive processes of rationalization and denial, often bolstered by religious beliefs or societal messages to 'save the marriage,' sustain women's continued investment in the relationship despite the harm. This theme points to the emotional entanglement in abusive relationships, highlighting that leaving is not just a logical decision but one heavily influenced by memory, love, fear, and identity.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of women who remain in abusive marriages in Malaysia, illuminating the intricate interplay of psychological, sociocultural, and economic factors that shape their decisions. The findings not only align with existing literature on intimate partner violence (IPV) but also provide culturally specific insights relevant to the Malaysian context. This section discusses key themes,

counselling implications, and systemic considerations, concluding with recommendations for future research and practice.

Findings and Literature Connection

Consistent with prior research (Anderson et al., 2003; Heron et al., 2022), participants prioritized their children's well-being over their own safety, fearing the consequences of single parenthood or custody loss. The participants' narratives reflect a tension between maternal sacrifice and self-preservation, echoing studies that highlight how motherhood can both anchor women to abusive relationships and motivate them to seek help (Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009). Notably, some women rationalized their spouses' presence as beneficial for their children, despite the abuse. This finding underscores the need for interventions addressing parental alienation and co-parenting dynamics in abusive contexts.

The influence of family expectations and societal stigma emerged as a significant barrier to leaving, corroborating studies on collectivist cultures (Bui & Morash, 1999; Ahmad et al., 2009). Participants described marriage as a familial obligation, with divorce perceived as a failure or source of shame. This aligns with research on how traditional gender roles and religious norms can perpetuate cycles of abuse (Bent-Goodley, 2005). Counsellors must recognize these cultural dimensions to avoid pathologizing women's decisions and work within their value systems to foster empowerment.

Economic vulnerability was a recurring theme, with participants citing limited income, lack of job skills, or fear of homelessness as reasons for staying. This mirrors global findings on economic abuse as a tool of control (Postmus et al., 2018). The study highlights the urgent need for structural support, such as subsidized housing, vocational training, and legal aid, to address financial barriers to leaving. Many participants clung to the belief that their partners would change, often attributing abuse to external stressors (e.g., work pressure). This reflects Walker's (1979) cycle of abuse theory, where intermittent remorse reinforces hope. Counsellors can gently challenge these narratives while validating survivors' emotions, helping them recognize patterns of abuse without inducing shame.

Implications for Counselling and Policy

The findings highlight an urgent need for trauma-informed, culturally attuned counselling approaches that emphasize survivor autonomy, emotional safety, and contextual understanding (Karakurt et al., 2022). Recognizing and normalizing ambivalence, rather than urging immediate separation, can empower women to make safer and more sustainable choices. Counselling sessions should incorporate parenting support to help clients reconcile their dual roles as caregivers and self-protectors.

To address broader societal influences, collaboration with religious leaders, community elders, and women's advocacy groups is crucial in reshaping community attitudes that normalize intimate partner violence (IPV). These collaborations can help bridge the gap between professional counselling and the lived realities of survivors, especially in rural or conservative communities.

On a structural level, economic support mechanisms, such as government-subsidized childcare, housing assistance, and employment pathways, must be expanded. Legal reforms that streamline protection orders and ensure swift removal of abusers from the family home are also critical. Additionally, public education campaigns can play a transformative role in shifting societal narratives about IPV, promoting healthy relationships, and raising awareness of support services.

Proposed Counselling Framework

Building on these findings, there is a clear need for a counselling framework that is culturally grounded and responsive to the complex realities faced by women who remain in abusive relationships. Such a framework should begin with assessment tools that help practitioners understand the cultural, familial, and financial pressures influencing women's decisions. Rather than assuming a universal path to safety, the framework should acknowledge and work within the unique constraints and values of everyone.

Safety planning models should be adapted to support women who, for various reasons, choose to stay, focusing on harm reduction and emotional well-being. Narrative and strength-based approaches can create space for survivors to make meaning of their experiences while affirming their resilience and autonomy. Given the central role of motherhood in many of the participants' narratives, the framework should also include modules on parenting in the context of IPV, with particular attention to the emotional safety of children.

This kind of integrated approach would enable counsellors to provide context-sensitive, non-judgmental support. More importantly, it would empower women to make informed, values-aligned choices while navigating the rugged terrain of intimate partner violence with dignity and agency.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the study offers critical insights, its small and homogenous sample, comprising six young Malay women, limits generalizability. Future studies should include participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, age groups, and geographical settings, including both urban and rural areas. Including perspectives from counsellors, community leaders, and religious figures would enrich understanding of systemic influences and help map a more comprehensive response to IPV.

Additionally, future research should examine how religious institutions, legal frameworks, and community-based interventions influence women's decisions to stay or leave. Longitudinal studies could further explore the long-term psychological, economic, and relational outcomes of women who remain in abusive marriages, as well as the effectiveness of targeted counselling interventions.

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