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**The Double Burden of a Pandemic:  
Examining the Impact of Covid-19 on Domestic  
Violence Against Women in Pakistan**

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## ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has served as a magnifying lens to the globally prevailing issue of domestic violence against women. This qualitative case study examines why domestic violence against women prevails in Pakistan, what factors have led to its increase during Covid-19, and how have civil society organizations responded to this issue. Primary data was collected through online interviews with 11 civil society actors working for women's rights in Pakistan. Employing a Feminist Model and Heise's Ecological Framework, the study's main findings show that contributory factors include existing gender inequalities such as women's low level of education and economic disempowerment, and sociocultural and religious indoctrination reinforcing women's subordination to men. These combined with factors specific to Covid-19, including restricted mobility, women's reduced access to social networks and other resources, and ensuing mental and economic stressors have made domestic spaces ideal breeding grounds for violence. While civil service organizations have attempted to tackle this issue through various initiatives explored in this study, the attempts remain insufficient. The findings shows that change is needed at all levels as institutions and politicians need to safeguard women's rights, and women need to be educated and empowered to break out of the patriarchal cycle of dependency on men.

Key Words: Pakistan, domestic violence, domestic violence against women, violence against women, Covid-19, pandemic, patriarchy, gender inequality

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## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

|                |    |
|----------------|----|
| Figure 1 ..... | 10 |
| Figure 2 ..... | 38 |
| Figure 3 ..... | 42 |
| Figure 4 ..... | 45 |
| <hr/>          |    |
| Table 1 .....  | 18 |

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|       |                                  |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| CSO   | Civil Service Organization(s)    |
| DRF   | Digital Rights Foundation        |
| DV    | Domestic Violence                |
| DVAW  | Domestic Violence Against Women  |
| EF    | Ecological Framework             |
| FDI   | Forum for Dignity Initiatives    |
| FM    | Feminist Model                   |
| HRCPP | Human Rights Commission Pakistan |
| IPV   | Intimate Partner Violence        |
| KPK   | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa               |
| MOHR  | Ministry of Human Rights         |
| NGO   | Non-Governmental Organization(s) |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| OECD     | Organization for Economic and Co-operation Development                 |
| SDG      | Sustainable Development Goal(s)  |
| SGBV     | Sexual and Gender-Based Violence                                       |
| SRHR     | Sexual and Reproductive Human Rights                                   |
| UN       | United Nations   |
| UN ESCAP | United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific |
| VAW      | Violence Against Women   |
| WHO      | World Health Organization  |

# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ABSTRACT.....  | ii |
| LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES.....  | iv |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....   | iv |
| 1. Introduction.....   | 1  |
| 1.1 Study Motivation, Aim and Research Questions .....                 | 2  |
| 2. State of the Art.....   | 5  |
| 2.1 VAW in Emergencies.....  | 5  |
| 2.2 Contextualizing DVAW in Pakistan .....                             | 6  |
| 3. Theoretical Framework.....  | 8  |
| 3.1 The Feminist Model .....   | 8  |
| 3.2 The Ecological Framework .....                                     | 10 |
| 4. Methodology.....  | 14 |
| 4.1 Ontology and Epistemology.....                                     | 14 |
| 4.2 Research Design.....   | 15 |
| 4.3 Data Collection in Times of Covid-19 .....                         | 15 |
| 4.4 Sampling.....  | 16 |
| 4.5 Interviews .....   | 17 |
| 4.6 Data Analysis .....  | 19 |
| 4.6.1 Coding .....   | 20 |
| 4.7 Ethical Considerations.....  | 21 |
| 4.8 Positionality and Reflexivity.....                                 | 21 |
| 4.9 Scope and Limitations.....   | 22 |
| 5. Findings and Discussion .....                                       | 23 |
| 5.1 Reasons for a High Prevalence of DVAW in Pakistan .....            | 23 |
| 5.1.1 Women’s Place in the Patriarchal Pakistani Society .....         | 23 |
| 5.1.2 Social Tolerance, Acceptance and Encouragement of DVAW .....     | 25 |
| 5.1.3 Belief that DVAW is Sanctioned by Religion.....                  | 28 |
| 5.1.4 Institutional Sexism: The Fault Lies in the System at Large..... | 28 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 5.2 Factors Contributing to the Rise in DVAW Amid Covid-19.....      | 30 |
| 5.2.1 Women Trapped Together with their Abusers .....                | 30 |
| 5.2.2 Restricted Mobility and Access to Services .....               | 33 |
| 5.2.3 Increase in Care Burden .....                                  | 33 |
| 5.2.4 Technology-A Blessing turned into a Curse during Covid-19..... | 34 |
| 5.2.5 Financial and other Mental Stressors Contributing to DVAW..... | 34 |
| 5.3 Managing DVAW During Covid-19 – The Role of CSOs .....           | 37 |
| 5.3.1 Reaching Out Through Online Platforms .....                    | 37 |
| 5.3.2 Referral Services and Psychosocial Support .....               | 39 |
| 5.3.3 Provision of Supplies.....                                     | 40 |
| 5.3.4 Awareness Raising and Capacity Building .....                  | 40 |
| 5.3.5 Research.....  | 41 |
| 5.4 Future Practice and Policy Implications.....                     | 41 |
| 6. Conclusion .....  | 46 |
| Bibliography .....   | 48 |
| Appendices.....  | 61 |
| Appendix A- Map of Pakistan.....                                     | 61 |
| Appendix B- Participant and Interview Details .....                  | 62 |
| Appendix C- Interview Guide.....                                     | 63 |
| Appendix D-Information and Consent Form .....                        | 65 |

# 1. Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is one of the most widespread and devastating violations of human rights, as more than one in three women across the world are affected by physical or sexual violence during their lifetime (UN, 2019; WHO 2021). Moreover, violence perpetrated by an intimate partner is the most pervasive form of VAW and affects 614 million women globally (WHO, 2021). In Pakistan, a report by UNODC (2020) indicates that up to 90 percent of women experience some form of violence by an intimate partner. This number is significant and suggests that around 99 million women in Pakistan are grappling with this terrible reality, given that they make up nearly half of the country's immense population (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population Division, 2019).

Beyond the many implications caused by VAW, the spread of the Covid-19 virus, declared as a pandemic in March 2020, has exacerbated the burdens put on women worldwide (UN Women, 2020a; UN Women, 2020b; WHO 2020). Since women make up 70% of the health workforce globally, they have taken on the role of first responders to this health crisis (UN Women, 2020a). Additionally, women are over-represented in the global informal economy, which is most likely to be the hardest hit economic sector because of this pandemic (Freund and Hamel, 2020). The burden of unpaid household and care work is also increasing significantly for women, as they must care for ill relatives or children who are at home in face of state-imposed lockdowns (OECD, 2020; Paskin, 2020). Importantly, this pandemic has brought forth a grim reality, that women are not safe even at home, given the horrifying surge in domestic violence (DV) levels worldwide, including in Pakistan (Bari, 2020a; Graham-Harrison et al., 2020), which forms the focus of this thesis. This has been referred to as the 'shadow pandemic' by UN Women (Vaeza, 2020) and declared by the UN Secretary General as a '*global urgency requiring urgent action*' (UN, 2020a).

Covid-19 has resulted in lengthy lockdown periods imposed in many countries, which may have served to control the spread of the virus but has also proven to be catalytic for increased domestic violence against women (DVAW), as many women are trapped with their abusers in residential spaces (Telles et al., 2020). The Executive Director of UN Women highlighted this



fearful reality by stating that “*confinement under stay-at-home orders is ‘a perfect storm’ for violent behavior behind closed doors as it exacerbates tensions about security, health, and money*” (UN, 2020b).

Rising DVAW during this time is further contributing to the economic and social crisis that is already underway because of Covid-19 (Shamla and Borah, 2020). Furthermore, research has shown that the economic costs of DV are significant, as it demands high expenditure of healthcare services and results in decreased labor productivity and lost income for women and their families (Shamla and Borah, 2020; Duvvury et al., 2013). Therefore, the prevalence of DV is not only harmful for its victims but is also crippling for the social and economic development of a country. These issues are reflected in the global Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, especially in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which is dedicated to ending all harmful practices against women and girls, including violence in public and private spheres (García-Moreno and Amin, 2016; UN, 2015). This reiterates the fact that addressing and eliminating all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls from its root causes is integral to the sustainable development of any country (García-Moreno and Amin, 2016; UN Women, 2019a).

## 1.1 Study Motivation, Aim and Research Questions

The endemic of VAW has existed for far longer than the current Covid-19 pandemic and, as stated by the WHO Chief, “*cannot be stopped with a vaccine*” (UN, 2021). While there is dedicated research to study the different aspects of Covid-19, such as its origin, characteristics and the antidote (Gavi, 2020), there is an equally acute need to address and prioritize the parallel-existing issue of DVAW which has been exacerbated during this time (Vaeza, 2020). Moreover, Civil Service Organizations (CSO) in many countries are playing the role of first responders to help mitigate this issue, yet they have not been recognized for this (UN Women, 2020c). According to UN VAW Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist Shruti Majumdar, the actions and efforts by CSOs are essential to address the issue of rising DV levels during Covid-19 (Ibid).

Therefore, this thesis aims to examine the factors that have contributed to the rise in DVAW in Pakistan during Covid-19 by analyzing how existing gender inequalities which contribute to this

issue have been exacerbated during the pandemic. Moreover, this study also examines the responsive and preventative interventions taken so far by CSOs during this time. The objective of this thesis is to illustrate the need to address the gendered dimensions of crises, specifically the underlying causes which render women vulnerable to violence and abuse during such situations. This is imperative to ensure their protection and well-being, especially because during times of crisis the issue of increasing DVAW is often sidelined due to a lack of willingness or capacity of governments to respond to it (Holmes and Bhuvanendra, 2014). In this light, the findings of this thesis seek to inform all actors involved in addressing this issue, including governments, politicians, policy makers, health and social workers, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies.

Three research questions guide the study:

1. Why is domestic violence against women (DVAW) so prevalent in Pakistan?
2. What factors have contributed to the increase in DVAW during Covid-19 in Pakistan?
3. How have Civil Service Organizations in Pakistan responded to reduce and prevent the impact of DVAW during Covid-19?

This thesis focuses on violence committed against women within the household. However, wherever the term VAW is used it includes DVAW as well. The definition of DV is followed as stated by Sindh's Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (2013, section 5):

*“Domestic Violence includes but is not limited to, all acts of gender based and other physical or psychological abuse committed by a respondent against women, children or other vulnerable persons, with whom the respondent is or has been in a domestic relationship-”*

This Act further defines physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse which form part of DV (Ibid). Moreover, in Pakistan the notion of domestic relationships extends beyond an intimate partner as the culture of joint family systems and living with in-laws after marriage is still very much a norm. Therefore, in this thesis the term DV covers more than

intimate partner violence (IPV) to fit the scope of this discussion within the context of Pakistan (Zia, 2018).

## 2. State of the Art

### 2.1 VAW in Emergencies

Although VAW exists in all situations, complex emergencies akin to the Covid-19 pandemic create circumstances where existing protective measures are disrupted, which increases the risk of women suffering from exploitation, abuse, and violence (Landis, 2020). Previous research has examined the link between pandemics and epidemics on gender-based violence towards women and girls. For example, during the Ebola virus in West Africa there was a considerable surge in gender-based violence, which was discounted as '*collateral damage*' from the epidemic (Peterman et al., 2020, p.3; Yasmin, 2016). Similarly, a study by Mitchell et al. (2016) showed a positive correlation between HIV and an increasing risk for IPV for women in Africa. Furthermore, research suggests that DV and IPV increase in other emergency situations which present various socioeconomic and health crises, such as during and following a natural disaster (Gearhart et al., 2018; Rao, 2020). Holmes and Bhuvanendra (2014) reported that during complex crisis situations, the most vulnerable groups of people including women and children are prone to violence and abuse based on factors such as their age, gender, or status in society.

A study showed that in refugee camp settings, IPV is the most common form of VAW (Horn, 2010). Additionally, a majority of VAW cases in situations of crisis and emergency are committed by known individuals (Ellsberg et al., 2008). In light of Covid-19, stay-at-home and quarantine orders and the ensuing social isolation may be compared to camp-like settings, where women are especially vulnerable to experiencing violence and abuse by a family member within the domestic sphere. Moreover, research indicates that the risk of DV rises during crisis situations because of variables such as mental and emotional stress, financial pressures, limited resources, and a change in roles and responsibilities among household members (Rubenstein et al., 2017).

While there is literature reviewing the link between increasing VAW during crisis situations, what remains a unique feature of the novel coronavirus pandemic is that it is a global health, social and economic crisis affecting countries all over the world, instead of being limited to a specific context. Moreover, there are certain factors associated with Covid-19 that have made it

especially impactful on DVAW, such as broad scale lockdowns and restrictions on movement implemented across the world (Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020).

There have been multiple reports, newspaper and journal articles, and opinion pieces which have explored the impact of Covid-19 on DV and IPV cases specifically (Bari, 2020a; Bettinger-Lopez and Bro, 2020; Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Kenis, 2020; Taub, 2020; UN Women, 2020a). A recent article illustrated how the pattern of increasing DV and VAW amid the Covid-19 pandemic is prevalent across countries worldwide (Graham-Harrison et al., 2020). For example, Brazil saw an estimated rise of nearly 50% in DV cases since Covid-19-induced lockdowns were enforced (Ibid). Similarly, in a city in the Hubei province of China reports of DV have more than doubled during the pandemic (Wanqing, 2020). There has also been a significant increase in the number of calls received by domestic abuse helplines in Cyprus, Singapore, and other countries (Gordon, 2020). In Nigeria, the situation turned so dire that in June 2020 the government declared a national emergency in all 36 states because of the high levels of rape and sexual violence cases (Isiaka, 2020).

This occurrence is not limited to the Global South but also extends to the Global North. Countries including Australia, France, Germany, and the United States have seen a significant increase in the number of reported cases of DV and other VAW and girls during the pandemic (Bettinger-Lopez and Bro, 2020). In the United Kingdom, the number of femicides seen in the first three weeks of the Covid-19-related lockdown were higher than ever witnessed during a three-week period in the past decade (Gordon, 2020). Interestingly, even though Sweden was the exception in not imposing a strict lockdown, research reveals a rise in IPV there as well, which most likely resulted from the socioeconomic changes brought forth by the pandemic (Perrotta Berlin, 2021).

## 2.2 Contextualizing DVAW in Pakistan

There is considerable literature exploring the issue of DVAW in Pakistan from different angles. A recent report found that home was the most unsafe location for women in Pakistan, and the most common type of violence experienced was perpetrated by an intimate partner or other family members, including parents, in-laws, and siblings (Social Policy and Development Centre

et al., 2019). Deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs and norms are known to be the predominant reasons for the high level of DVAW in Pakistan (Ali and Gavino, 2008; Hadi, 2017; Tarar and Pulla, 2014). These underlying patriarchal structures have resulted in various sociocultural, religious, and legal factors which contribute to this problem. Social attitudes towards the issue are intrinsically problematic as abuse perpetrated towards women is normalized within relationships (Fikree et al., 2005; Saeed, 2012). Moreover, a feudal value system remains prevalent in the country, which places a man's honor on his *zar*, *zan* and *zameen* (wealth, woman and land). This equates women to domestic property and reinforces a man's power over 'his' woman and his right to abuse her (Awan, 2016; Ehsan et al., 2015; Khan, 2016).

Based in its colonial history and cultural values, Pakistani society maintains a marked distinction between the private and public sphere and women are generally expected to remain within the private realm and uphold family honor (Chatterjee, 1989; Tarar and Pulla, 2014; Zia, 2018). This demarcation between the private and public is translated into societal silence over DVAW, which is viewed as a private affair (Hadi, 2018). This is further reflected in institutional attitudes towards cases of DV, as officials such as the police and other law enforcement bodies often view DV as a personal matter which should be solved within the household (Hadi, 2018; Zia, 2018). Furthermore, religious leaders in Pakistan are repeatedly seen to endorse the subordination and oppression of women as Islamic (Zia, 2018).

Similar to other countries worldwide, DVAW has increased exponentially since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in Pakistan, as women are confined to their homes with abusive relatives (Bari, 2020a). Research on the pandemic's impact on DVAW in Pakistan is advancing, as literature explores it from different perspectives (Haq et al., 2020; Baig et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2020; Malik and Naeem, 2020). Nevertheless, the research available is limited, given the magnitude and complexity of the problem and the fact that the pandemic is still ongoing. Thus, there is ample room to add to the scholarship in this field and to create awareness and provide information to the public and relevant actors who can work to counter this problem now and in the future.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This thesis draws on the Feminist Model (FM) on DV to examine the sociocultural context within which DVAW prevails in Pakistan (Bell and Naugle, 2008; Burelomova et al., 2018; McPhail et. al, 2007). In line with FM, the author deems patriarchy and the resulting gender inequalities as the main causes for DVAW in Pakistan (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Additionally, FM is also relied upon to analyze how existing patriarchal structures within Pakistani society have contributed to exacerbate DVAW during Covid-19. However, the author recognizes that the premise that DV results from patriarchy is insufficient to explain this complex phenomenon. Therefore, this thesis also employs the Ecological Framework (EF) by Heise (1998) to conceptualize DVAW as a multi-faceted phenomenon resulting from a complex interchange between personal and sociocultural factors at micro, meso and macro levels.

### 3.1 The Feminist Model

Feminist theorists maintain that violent relationships are essentially a consequence of societal norms and a patriarchal culture which support male dominance and female subordination, thus making men the primary perpetrators and women the primary victims of violence (Bell and Naugle, 2008; Brown, 2012; Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Women are kept subjugated in relationships through tactics such as isolation, domination, and physical, sexual, economic and psychological abuse (McPhail et al., 2007).

FM seeks to explain DVAW by analyzing the sociocultural context within which it occurs (Burelomova et al., 2018). This is imperative for understanding the phenomenon, as well as for practice and for policy, as *“the context of violence provides a powerful grounding for establishing its meanings”* (Stanko, 2006, p. 545). FM also focuses on women empowerment by recognizing their strength, resilience, and autonomy (McPhail et al., 2007).

According to De Beauvoir (1949), women’s oppression and inferiority to men throughout history is socially constructed and results from patriarchy. Moreover, the society dictates how women are supposed to behave and fit their ‘feminine’ mould, which can include notions of honor, chastity and shame associated with women (Ibid). FM disputes the patriarchal notions of male

entitlement and privilege and challenges the belief that DV is a private family matter (McPhail et al., 2007). As such, feminist researchers maintain that many of the gender-based problems faced by women have their roots, and their solutions, in social, cultural, and political factors, thus illustrated by the feminist maxim “*the personal is political*” (Ibid, p.818).

However, early feminist theories of DVAW have been criticized for being single dimensional by focusing on patriarchy as the only basis of the issue. Dutton (2006, cited in McPhail et. al, 2007, p.97) states that “*this feminist argument indicates patriarchy as a direct cause of wife assault rather than an inducement that interacts with other causes.*” However, forthcoming feminist analysis of DVAW acknowledge that this phenomenon contains multiple realities, for example by being the result of intersectionality between gender and other factors such as race, sex, age and class (Crenshaw, 1991; Imkaan, 2019).

The traditional feminist approach which only views men as perpetrators of DV has also been challenged (Carrington, 2013; Schneider, 1992). Kimmel (2000) questions the gender symmetry debate of DV by noting empirical evidence which suggests that DV perpetrated by both women and men is equivalent. Nonetheless, the author refutes this on the basis of extended research which has repeatedly shown that while violence can be perpetrated by both men and women, women are more likely to be victims of DV as compared to men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Silverman 2001; Hamberger and Guse, 2002). Also, men generally inflict a larger amount and more severe degrees of violence towards women than the other way around (Hester, 2013). Similarly, in the context of Pakistan, a systematic review of the available empirical studies on interpersonal violence found out that all studies reported men as the perpetrators of DV and women as the victims (Ali et al., 2014).

Additionally, there are suggestions in research that violence perpetrated by women against women might result from internalized sexism, but there is a need for empirical research to verify this theory (Bearman et al., 2009; Cannon et al., 2015). Moreover, FM’s explanation of DV resulting from power imbalance in a relationship (Dobash and Dobash, 1979) does not account for why some men perpetrate violence while others do not, especially in the same sociocultural context (Wilson, 1982).



Henceforth, this thesis uses EF by Heise (1998) to counter these criticisms by illustrating that perpetration and victimization of DV is the result of various personal, situational, and sociocultural factors which, either individually or through interlinkages, have contributed to the high prevalence of DVAW in Pakistan.

### 3.2 The Ecological Framework

The ecological models for understanding interpersonal violence can be traced back to the original work of Bronfenbrenner (1977) on human development. This model suggests that humans' experiences and actions are affected by their immediate environment as well as broader social contexts (Ibid). Academic Lori Heise later applied this model to VAW, claiming “*what a nested ecological approach to violence does... is to help activists and researchers grapple with the complexity of real life*” (Heise 1998, p.285).

The EF by Heise (1998), demonstrated in Figure 1 below, conceptualizes VAW as an interplay of factors between the individual, relationship, community, and society levels which make an individual more susceptible to violence than others. Heise (1998) perceived that the existing feminist paradigms affirming patriarchy as the etiology of VAW could not sufficiently explain why some women experienced violence while others did not. Therefore, she used the ecological model as a heuristic tool to gain a better understanding of the relation between an individual and their immediate environment, which increases their likelihood of perpetration or victimization of interpersonal violence (Ibid).

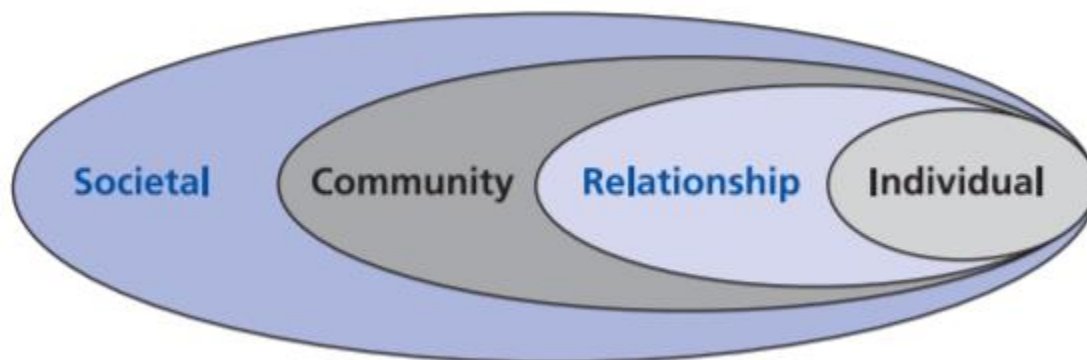


Figure 1: An Integrated Ecological Framework for Understanding Violence (Heise 1998; WHO, 2002).

### *3.2.1 Individual*

The first level forms the innermost circle of the framework and includes components from an individual's personal history (Heise, 1998). This includes experiences such as witnessing marital or household abuse, being abused or neglected as a child, or having an absent father figure (Carlson, 1984; Heise 1998). Exposure to violence within the household as a child, whether as a witness or a victim is a dominant factor which can result in the victimization or perpetration of violence (Riggs et al., 2000; Capaldi et. al, 2012). However, research has also shown that there may be other mediating factors, such as marital conflict (Riggs et al., 2000), anti-social behavior, childhood conduct problems, alcohol abuse (Capaldi et. al, 2012), poor self-esteem, and low access to personal resources such as income and education (Carlson, 1984). Moreover, other personal factors such as age and ethnicity also influence the likelihood of victimization or perpetration of interpersonal violence (WHO, 2002).

### *3.2.2 Relationship/Family*

The second level represents the immediate context where violence takes place (Heise, 1998). It includes factors such as low socioeconomic status or state of unemployment, adhering to traditional gender roles, and emotional or mental health issues (Riggs et al., 2000; Stith et al. 2004). Carlson (1984) recognizes that changes in the division of labor within a household can influence violence in relationships, and social isolation may also factor in such situations.

Other relationship stressors can include having large families and insufficient resources, and the resulting inability to provide for one's family may be expressed through VAW and children in the household (Carlson, 1984). Theorists have also emphasized on the role of power dynamics and male dominance within a household as influential factors over violence in relationships (Anderson, 1997; Heise, 1998). Moreover, an analysis of 15 case studies of DV in Bombay, India showed that extended family members from the husband's side also contributed to, and even perpetuated, violence against the wife, resulting from power hierarchies within the household (Fernandez, 1997).

### *3.3.3 Community*

The third level contains the formal and informal institutions and social structures that exist within the community (Heise, 1998). Instances such as widespread unemployment or poverty play a role here (Carlson, 1984; Heise, 1998). Additionally, other community characteristics at this level include the laws and policies related to DV, the competence of the criminal justice systems, the efficiency and attitudes of law enforcement officials towards cases of DV, and the community's norms and responses to this problem (Carlson, 1984). Flake (2005) also identified the region of residence, such as urban-rural residence as a community-level factor. Moreover, community-level practices such as honor killings (Kulwicksi, 2002; Offenhauer and Buchalter, 2006), restrictive marriage norms (Obeid et al., 2010) and women's hesitation to leave abusive relationships due to a lack of social support and general silence over DV (Deyessa et. al, 2009) are subsumed in this level.

Although Carlson (1984) situated isolation from the social network at the relationship level, Heise (1998) identifies social isolation of women and the family to form part of this level. In this thesis, the findings show that social isolation can fall either under the relationship level where it is enforced by the perpetrator, or under the community level when it is an automatic result of a community-level factor, such as the government-imposed lockdown because of Covid-19.

### *3.3.4 Society*

The fourth level embodies broad cultural values, perceptions and norms that exist within the society at large (Heise, 1998). Several factors come into play here, such as notions of masculinity related to aggression, dominance, and honor, cultural reinforcement of rigid traditional gender-roles, societal perceptions towards DVAW, and the cultural ethos of resorting to violence as a means to settle interpersonal disputes (Ibid). More generally, the patriarchal structures underpinning the workings of a society are also included at this level (Jefferies, 2016). Additionally, in societies like Pakistan, where religious groups have a strong influence, their norms and actions may also affect societal perceptions towards DVAW (Obeid et al., 2010).

Identifying a clear demarcation between the different levels of the EF is neither easy nor the goal (Heise, 1998). Instead, emphasis is placed on the idea that different factors can occur and interact

at the different micro, meso and macro levels, which can help explain the problem of DVAW in a comprehensive manner (Ibid). Holmes and Bhuvanendra (2014) recognize that this framework can be useful to illustrate that VAW can occur at multiple levels in a disaster or conflict situation, and this study illustrates the same in the context of Covid-19 in Pakistan. Moreover, feminist perspectives can be integrated within EF, not simply as a single component of the framework but rather as the '*glue*' which holds it together (McPhail et al., 2007, p.834). Therefore, this study will utilize feminist perspectives and this conceptual framework to present a holistic analysis of the high prevalence of DVAW in Pakistan and how the pandemic has exacerbated it.

## 4. Methodology

This chapter presents how this research has been conducted, including the ethical considerations, reflections on my positionality as a researcher, and the data limitations.

### 4.1 Ontology and Epistemology

During this research, an important realization was to recognize what I bring to this thesis, in ways of my own feminist ideologies and personal experiences which have guided my actions throughout the research process (Creswell and Poth, 2017). My aim was to focus on how the research participants interpret the context and the society around them, based on their social interactions and the historical and cultural norms surrounding their environment (Ibid). Taking this into account, a feminist-constructivist approach has been employed for this research.

As a researcher from a constructive standpoint, I adopt a subjective epistemological assumption whereby I rely on the subjective experiences of the study participants and give meaning to the generated data through my own cognitive processes (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Therefore, as the researcher I aim to understand and interpret the participants' thoughts and views related to how they interpret their social context in relation to the topic being researched (Ibid). While this might result in a "*double interpretation*" as I construe the research participants' interpretations (Bryman, 2012, p.31), as a feminist researcher I abide by the view that knowledge on a topic derives from subjective and unique circumstances, contexts, and experiences (Furlin, 2015).

Additionally, the ontological position taken here is feminist and relativist in nature. Relativist ontology assumes that the phenomenon being researched has multiple realities (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017), and that the researcher presents one specific version of these realities based on the social interactions between the researcher and the participants (Bryman, 2012). As a methodological perspective, a feminist ontological assumption fundamentally challenges the androcentric predispositions of 'knowledge' (Tickner, 2005). In this regard, the feminist ontological position adopted here relies on Tickner's (2005) ontology of social relations accounting for unequal social structures, which this thesis looks at in the context of Pakistan.

## 4.2 Research Design

To get a detailed understanding of the topic at hand, a qualitative case-study research design has been employed (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Yin, 2014). From a feminist perspective, this method was favored because I could interact directly with the research participants in Pakistan who have experience with working with gender issues including DVAW. This allowed for a deep and rich understanding of the participants' behaviors, values, and experiences in relation to both the issue and the context being explored (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, qualitative research was preferred because it allows for participants not to be treated as objects that are controlled by technical procedures (Ibid).

While qualitative research may run the risk of being too subjective (Bryman, 2012), this study does not aim to generalize its findings to a broader population. Instead, the focus is on the transferability of the findings to other similar contexts and circumstances, such as the rise of DV during Covid-19 in other sociocultural contexts similar to Pakistan (Denscombe, 2014). This is supported by providing the reader with an in-depth description of the context and the findings (Ibid).

## 4.3 Data Collection in Times of Covid-19

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, it has been recognized that this era of social distancing has presented both unique opportunities and challenges related to social qualitative research (Lobe et al., 2020). For this thesis, the pandemic has presented an opportunity to study a critical aspect of the crisis, namely how it has impacted DVAW in Pakistan. While my plan was to be in the country to collect data on site, I was unable to do so because of the travel restrictions and other challenges posed during this time. Consequently, the most probable option was to stay in Sweden and collect the data remotely.

In a constructivist qualitative study, the epistemological assumption is to get as close as possible to the research participants, in order to gain extensive insight into their views and experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2017). However, because of social distancing and travel restrictions for social researchers like me, it became difficult to reduce the "*objective separateness*" between myself as the researcher and the research participants (Guba and Lincoln, 1988, p.94 cited in

Creswell and Poth, 2017). The most viable solution to overcome this was to conduct online, live interviews with the participants through online platforms.

Moreover, although I did not aim to interview survivors of DV because of multiple ethical considerations, I wanted to supplement my research with some input from survivors through an online anonymous survey. Unfortunately, despite my efforts to try to implement this through different channels such as social media platforms or through NGOs, it did not materialize, and I had to drop this method. This reminded me once again how cumbersome and inflexible the process of data collection can be during a pandemic, especially when done remotely.

#### 4.4 Sampling

For this research, a purposive sampling method was employed as participants were selected based on their work with DVAW issues in Pakistan, so they could contribute directly to the research questions of this study (Bryman, 2012). All the participants were civil society actors and/or activists who had specific experience with VAW and DV in Pakistan.

My first gatekeeper was my supervisor from the internship we had to do for this Master's program. I chose to intern for Every Woman Treaty, which is an international coalition campaigning for a global treaty to end violence against women and girls worldwide. Luckily, my supervisor was Pakistani, and she helped me connect to one person in Pakistan whom I interviewed for this study. Apart from this, I utilized my social and professional network in Pakistan to gain potential leads for interviews. Other gatekeepers included a former professor who is a lawyer and an activist, and a family friend who has decades of experience in the development and political sector in Pakistan.

Moreover, I also incorporated the method of snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012) as the participants I was in contact with referred other potential interviewees to me. This however only worked in one case, whereas for the majority of the interviews I relied on my gatekeepers. I recognize that conducting this research in my own country made certain things easier for me, especially during the pandemic, as perhaps getting contacts for online interviews in a completely foreign context might have been more difficult.

## 4.5 Interviews

This case study relied on first-hand interviews as a primary source of data (Yin, 2014). The first step was creating an interview guide (see Appendix C) with a set of premeditated questions to navigate the semi-structured interviews. After reaching out to multiple potential interviewees, I scheduled 12 interviews with those who confirmed their availability and willingness to participate in this research. This was, however, not a definitive number of interviews that I needed to have. I relied on the principle of data saturation to determine the sample size of participants in this research and thus decided to continue interviewing participants until increasing the sample size did not include any new information in the already collected data (Bryman, 2012). The aim at the beginning of the research was to interview at least 10-12 different stakeholders, at which point data saturation might be reached (Guest et al. 2006, cited in Bryman, 2012).

As was perhaps expected during the data collection process, I encountered some difficulties as two of my confirmed interviewees did not show up for the interview, and despite numerous attempts to follow up with them, the interviews did not take place. Therefore, I ended up with 10 interviews in total, but data saturation was reached at this point, leaving me satisfied with the content of the data that was generated. Moreover, for one interview I had two respondents who were co-founders of a local NGO, thus in total making the number of respondents 11. The primary data collection process of interviews extended from January 2021 until February 2021.

Table 1 below illustrates the main details of the interviews conducted with the 11 respondents. The shortest interview was 22 minutes and the longest was 110 minutes, with the rest averaging around 40-odd minutes. Each interview was audio recorded after seeking explicit consent from the interviewee. Ten respondents were women, including two transgender women, and one respondent was a man.



*Table 1: Summary of Primary Data Collection*

| <b>Who</b>  | <b>How</b>          | <b>From Where</b>                                    | <b>When</b>          | <b>Focus</b>   |
|---|---------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| Legal Head at a local NGO                                   | Whatsapp voice call | Islamabad and Rawalpindi                             | 2021.01.21           | Legal cases and complaints of DV   |
| Executive Director of a local NGO                           | Zoom video call     | Khyber Pakhtunkwa (KPK) province                     | 2021.01.22           | VAW in KPK; Awareness-raising initiatives; registration of women's national identity cards   |
| Portfolio Manager at UN Women Pakistan                      | Zoom voice call     | Country-wide focus                                   | 2021.01.26           | Policy and legislative framework surrounding violence against women; capacity building of key frontline service providers; capacity assessment and trainings   |
| Sexual and Gender Based Violence Specialist                 | Zoom video call     | Punjab province                                      | 2021.02.06           | Cultural factors of DV; gender-sensitivity in service providers; role of politicians in the issue of GBV   |
| Research and Policy Director at a local foundation          | Zoom video call     | Based in Islamabad but provide services country-wide | 2021.02.09           | Role of technology in DV; increase in DV-related calls on the helpline during Covid; legislative gaps related to DV  |
| Women's Rights Activist                                     | Zoom voice call     | Islamabad  | 2021.02.11           | Effect of lockdown on DV; culture and religious factors contributing to DV   |
| Human Rights Activist and Executive Director of a local NGO | Zoom voice call     | Islamabad  | 2021.02.16           | Interconnectedness of DV with other forms of VAW; different types of DV faced by women in Pakistan; effect of Covid on DV and the organization's efforts to it |
| Founders of a local NGO for trans community rights          | Zoom video call     | Islamabad  | 2021.02.17           | Transwomen's experiences with violence within the household and society at large   |
| Associated with multiple NGOs and Human Rights Commission   | Zoom voice call     | Sindh province                                       | 2021.02.21           | Weaknesses of the legal and criminal justice system; in-depth discussion of cases of DV  |
| Executive Director at a local NGO                           | Zoom video call     | 2021.02.23   | Islamabad and Quetta | Gender and sexual minorities' experience with DV; cultural reasons for high prevalence of DV   |

This study employed semi-structured interviews which allows for many of the feminist research goals to be accomplished, such as ensuring an open and interactive dialogue between the researcher and the interviewee, giving them the space and opportunity to speak openly and freely about their own experiences, and removing the hierarchy which may be present between the

researcher and the participant (Bryman, 2012). Indeed, this method showed me how each interview experience is unique as it allowed for invaluable insights and personal experiences into the topic (Yin, 2014). Some participants talked openly about their experiences of working with DVAW, even sharing personal accounts of domestic and/or other violence. In other instances, I had to steer the conversation a bit more where I saw that the participant was waiting for me to ask the next question. However, an overall observation which I concluded was that the participants were deeply invested in the issue of women's human rights and thus were willing to be open in their conversations during the interviews.

Language also played an important role in the interview process. Pakistan's official languages are Urdu and English, and it is common for people to converse by mixing the two languages. Being from the context, I know that English is strongly linked to classicism in Pakistan and is seen as a status symbol, where it is perceived that only those with a foreign or private education or from a higher socioeconomic class can speak English. In order to not feed into these presumptions and avoid making the interviewee feel like I was implying something negative, I refrained from actively asking whether they want to speak in English or Urdu and simply followed their cue. Some of the interviews were in a mix of both English and Urdu, and the rest were almost purely either in English or Urdu. My familiarity with the context and the language proved to be beneficial as I was able to understand the slang words and phrases commonly used in Urdu. That helped me gain an insight into what the interviewee wanted to convey, even if they expressed it through a metaphor (Becker and Geer, 1957 cited in Bryman, 2012).

## 4.6 Data Analysis

Adopting a constructivist open analytical approach, the responses of the interviewees were placed within their personal, cultural, and situational contexts, rather than treating their responses as hardcore true depictions of reality (Silverman, 2013).

Moreover, a thematic analysis was conducted based on recurring themes and motifs that appear throughout the primary data gathered. Using a thematic analysis is suitable for my study particularly because it complements the conceptual framework employed in this research. The framework posits that interactions between the individual and their immediate environment at

individual, relationship, community, and society levels can help in understanding their behaviors and experiences, such as with DV (Heise, 1998). Once the different themes were identified, I placed them within these different levels which allowed for a coherent way to present the data based on these themes (Bryman, 2012). Although the procedure of thematic analysis is described as “*remarkably underdeveloped*” because it lacks specific steps or a procedural method, it is this flexibility that has made it a popular method of analysis during qualitative research (Bryman, 2012, p. 580).

Once the primary data collection was over, I started the transcription process. The interviews in Urdu or that were a mix of Urdu and English were transcribed manually, whereas those in English were transcribed through the transcription app Otter. During the manual transcription process, I translated the text from Urdu to English while I transcribed, since I am most comfortable writing in English. When transcribing through the app, I went back to the transcription and corrected any mistakes. The transcription process gave me the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the responses, as well as important insights which I might not have picked up on during the interview (Patton, 2015).

#### 4.6.1 Coding

Once the transcription process was completed, the transcript files were uploaded in NVivo, a software program which was used to organize, code, and analyze the data. A two-step coding process was employed to arrange and analyze the data into findings (Charmaz, 2006). The first step was an inductive open-coding process whereby the data was scoured through for all possible concepts that relate to the topic of this study. An open-minded approach was adopted at this stage, which resulted in a detailed process where numerous codes were formed (Ibid). Within the several codes created, more detailed sub-codes were also identified. All these codes corresponded to broader themes fitting the research questions.

The second step consisted of focused coding where the data was re-examined and this time the coding was done in accordance with the conceptual framework and theory which are utilized in this thesis. During this process some of the initial codes were let go as new ones emerged, some of which were a combination of the previous codes (Charmaz, 2006). In line with EF, four main

codes for each level for factors relating to DVAW (individual, relationship, community, and society) were generated. In addition to this, there were codes for the initiatives taken by CSOs.

## 4.7 Ethical Considerations

I ensured to go about the research process in the most ethical manner possible, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic being studied. Keeping the arising ethical issues in mind and the fact that the research was conducted remotely, I decided that I do not have the training nor am I in the position to inquire from women about their experiences with DV (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011). Therefore, I did not interview survivors of DV and focused on interviewing civil society actors in the country.

As the interviews were held online, I reassured the participants about the purpose and the ethical considerations of the study. I created a consent form (see Appendix D) which outlined the purpose of my research, the role of the participants as interviewees, how the data will be handled and finally that if they wanted, complete anonymity will be ensured. These forms were sent to each participant before the scheduled interview. I also made sure to get their verbal consent before recording each interview and about whether they wished to remain anonymous or not. Even though all the participants gave explicit permission to be named, after careful consideration I decided to use pseudonyms instead, to protect their identity (Creswell and Poth, 2018) and circumvent any security issues that may arise. To ensure anonymity, the interview recordings were stored on a password-protected phone and laptop, and the participants' names were nowhere on the transcripts or the uploaded recordings.

## 4.8 Positionality and Reflexivity

In order to undertake an ethical and participatory research, I reflected on my position as a researcher and the resulting power dynamics throughout the process (Sultana, 2007). This reflexivity is also a fundamental tenet of feminist research (Rose, 1997). Although I am from Pakistan and thus technically not an 'outsider' conducting research in this cultural context, I still acknowledge that my situation is one of privilege, especially when compared to those women whose cases have formed the basis of my research (Ibid). This privilege can be attributed to my personal circumstances, such as belonging to the upper-middle class in Pakistan and my ability

to move abroad as a woman and study a Master's program at a world class Western university. Or perhaps it is more nuanced, in the sense that I have the privilege of sitting on the other side of the computer, being the one conducting the research and analyzing the data collected, thus holding the final 'power' to interpret and use the data according to my purposes (Gilbert, 1994, cited in Rose, 1997).

While my cultural knowledge and familiarity proved to be an asset for this research, being critical of my context was not always easy, as it required me to question my own knowledge, biases, and the norms and values known to me. In this light, my contextual and cultural knowledge allowed me to explore and question the development of my own critical consciousness as a woman from Pakistan, and to see how it shapes and steers this research process (Zamudio et al., 2009).

#### 4.9 Scope and Limitations

Several prominent limitations have been recognized during this study. First, my plan to get direct input from survivors of DV through an online questionnaire was unsuccessful, which would have added invaluable personal insights to this research. Moreover, this thesis is focused only on women, including transwomen, who might have faced increased DV amid Covid-19, because women as a group suffer disproportionately from this phenomenon (Ali et al., 2014; Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Therefore, it is limited in its study of a particular group and does not include others who may also be vulnerable to DV, such as children, members of the LGBTQI+ communities, and men.

Moreover, keeping in mind the scope of this study, my focus was to generate an understanding of the issue at hand from the viewpoints of civil society actors in Pakistan, and thus other actors such as government figures were purposely not included in this study. Furthermore, given that this is a recent and ongoing issue, there is sparse data available on this topic, especially in the context of Pakistan. Finally, this study is limited to the context of Pakistan and in line with feminist research methodology, it is not generalizable to the wider context of women overall (Tickner, 2005).

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The results of the study and the concomitant discussions in this chapter illustrate why DV is so prevalent in Pakistan, how the contributory factors were exacerbated during the pandemic, the interventions taken by CSOs, and what this indicates for future practice and policy implications.

### 5.1 Reasons for a High Prevalence of DVAW in Pakistan

This section aims to contextualize the phenomenon of DVAW in Pakistan by providing a localized understanding of the issue in line with varying factors at the individual, relationship, community and societal levels.

#### 5.1.1 Women's Place in the Patriarchal Pakistani Society

Patriarchal ideologies are not only deeply embedded within Pakistani society but are also used as a social mechanism to control women and ensure their subordination, both within the household and society at large (Bell and Naugle, 2008; Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Hadi, 2017; Tarar and Pulla, 2014). In this regard, women are generally viewed as 'lesser' than men and retain an inferior social, economic, and political status (De Beauvoir 1949; Tarar and Pulla, 2014). This was confirmed by the majority of the study participants when asked why DVAW was so prevalent in Pakistan. One interviewee encapsulates it as follows: *"I think it all goes back to patriarchy and the patriarchal values that are so embedded in our culture. So I think that's the biggest root cause"* (Sameena, 26 January).

#### *Women are Viewed as Property and Honor Symbols*

Pakistan's feudal society and the ensuing tribal mindset validates men's dominance over women, whose rights are neither recognized nor accepted (Awan, 2016; Habib et al., 2013; Khan, 2016). Moreover, the concept of honor in patriarchal cultures is associated with women as a way to control their sexuality and freedom, which reinforces violent masculinity towards women (Offenhauer and Buchalter, 2006; Qaisrani et al., 2016; Saeed, 2012). This also plays a role in the prevalence of DVAW at the community level (Kulwicki, 2000). Arifa from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK, a Pashtun-dominated province) explained in her interview that the concepts of pride and honor are very important to Pashtun men which has resulted in numerous, and

mostly unreported, cases of DV and honor killings in KPK. She stated that this has worsened during the pandemic, as only in March 2020 KPK had 399 reported cases of sexual and physical violence, which is significantly higher than before.

In cases of DV in marital relationships, the importance of honor attached to a woman is so significant that it outweighs the suffering borne by her. The interviewees contended that in such instances, women are expected to put up with abuse because anything otherwise would dishonor the woman and her family. A cross-cultural study on the attitude towards intimate honor-based violence in India, Iran, Malaysia and Pakistan found that Pakistanis were most approving of honor-based attitudes (Lowe et al., 2018). Pakistani society views women as the representatives of male and family honor, and men as their guardians (Tarar and Pulla, 2014). Consequently, women's importance is seen only in relation to men, and they have no rights or importance in their own accord (Hadi, 2018).

Moreover, these notions of honor and shame are deeply reflected in how trans-persons are viewed in Pakistani society. In her interview, a trans-gender rights activist explains the situation of DV for transgender women as follows:

*The amount of domestic violence that the trans-community faces, probably no other community faces it that much, because in our society parents will accept the fact their son is a thief, or a terrorist or a rapist, but will not accept their child as a trans-person. The trans-community faces violence from the beginning, starting from their household. They are beaten up. Many trans-people have been murdered in the name of family honor...*  
(Khushi, 17 February).

Undoubtedly, these cultural norms, beliefs and attitudes pave the way for DVAW in society as women continue to be viewed and treated as representatives of morality and honor, with disregard to their own freedom, liberties, and agency (Bell and Naugle, 2008; Hadi, 2017; Heise, 1998).

## *Systematic Disempowerment of Women*

The analysis from the interviews further reveals that Pakistani culture systemically hinders the empowerment of women in multiple ways, so they become intrinsically dependent on their male counterparts. A key finding from the interviews indicates that women's subordinate role in relationships and families is underpinned by personal factors such as level of education, state of employment and general awareness of their rights (Carlson, 1984). Moreover, one interviewee highlighted that nearly 12 million women in Pakistan do not have national identity cards (Ghauri, 2017), which is a colossal impediment towards their independence and empowerment.

Education is seen to play a paramount role here, as less than 47% of women are literate in Pakistan (O'Neill, 2021). In many families, girls' education and careers are not given much importance due to factors such as a lack of resources, preference of sons' education and careers over daughters', and prioritizing girls' marriage over their education (Ali et. al, 2011; Rabbani et al., 2008). Lack of education and economic dependency renders women disempowered, with little decision-making ability and an unawareness of their rights, thus making them more prone to become victims of violence (Ali et. al, 2011; Qaisrani et al., 2016). This creates a cycle of dependency, where women are forced to rely on the men in their lives in everything they do, from finance to mobility, thus weakening their status both within the household and society at large and furthering their overall dependency (Ibid).

### 5.1.2 Social Tolerance, Acceptance and Encouragement of DVAW

One in three urban Pakistani men believe that a husband has the right to hit his wife if she misbehaves (World Justice Project and Gallup Pakistan, 2017). A majority of interviewees stated that DV is inherently normalized in Pakistani society and is not seen as a social evil or even a crime. These societal norms and values influence the prevalence of DV within society (Carlson, 1984). According to one respondent:

*...there is a lot of tolerance for this. People don't view DV as a crime. People believe that in such domestic relationships, it is the man's duty to be angry and it is the woman's duty to compromise. This is the general perception... (Adila, 16 February).*



### *Cultural Indoctrination Normalizing DV*

According to Heise (1998), a culture which accepts physical chastisement of women under certain circumstances often has a high prevalence of DV in the society overall. For example, Arifa admitted in her interview that in Pashtun culture, not only is DVAW tolerated, it is also *encouraged* as a way of men to display their masculinity and superiority over women.

Indeed, a significant reason why violence is normalized within relationships is that many perpetrators and survivors have seen violence within their households, especially their mothers suffering at the hands of their fathers. This affects the likelihood of future victimization or perpetration of DV (Carlson, 1984; Heise 1998). In Pakistani culture, women are socialized to prepare for married life and are taught to be an obedient wife and daughter in law, even if that means accepting DV in the marital home (Hadi, 2018). In her interview, Faiza explains that this is inculcated in girls from a young age, who are told that their husband's home is their actual home and only *“their dead body will leave the marital home,”* meaning that they are to uphold their marital relationship at all costs. This social conditioning results in women internalizing the problematic values of patriarchy and gender inequality, which causes them to view DV as something normal (Hadi, 2018).

Moreover, the findings show that many times, women are unable to recognize that they are being subjected to DV, especially if it is not physical abuse, because they have been conditioned to both expect and accept such behavior. One study respondent shared an example where during a gender sensitivity training with medical staff, a female doctor told her that her in-laws take her salary and she lacks agency over her decisions, but she was unable to identify this as economic abuse.

### *Social Stigma Standing in the Way of DV Survivors*

In Pakistani society, the social stigma surrounding DV and divorce is severe and women feel like they have a lot to lose by speaking up about their experiences with domestic abuse, such as by bringing shame to the family, and being left with little to no support by family and friends (Hadi, 2018; Rabbani et al., 2008). The study confirms this, as many respondents quoted examples of

women who wanted to take an action against abuse but were silenced by threats of divorce by their husbands. One respondent explains that:

*... if we talk about married women, their husbands threaten them that if you report the abuse to the police, or tell anyone, I will divorce you. So, this is the last straw for women, and that is why they stay quiet (Arifa, 22 January).*

In Pakistan, great importance is attached to maintaining a social status and a high value is placed on societal opinions. The Urdu phrase *log kya kahengay* (what will people say) is one of the most common justifications used to adhere to gendered traditional social and cultural norms, including letting women suffer abuse in marital relationships. In fact, a Norwegian-Pakistani director made a film by the same name, which was an amalgamation of her own personal experiences and fiction, and portrayed the importance placed on societal values and people's opinions by Pakistani families, even at terrifying costs (Hoggatt, 2018).

### *Violence from Someone Known Remains a Difficult Pill to Swallow*

Despite the bleak picture painted about the general societal perceptions towards the issue of DV, there was consensus amongst the study respondents that Pakistani society is gradually moving towards accepting that VAW is a grave problem that needs to be addressed. Nevertheless, the common view among respondents was that it is easier to openly talk and condemn violence if it comes from a stranger, while it is much more difficult to talk about or report violence from within the home.

In this regard, DV is still not openly accepted or made part of the larger conversation yet. A survey by Gallup and Gilani Pakistan (2017) shows that 65% of Pakistanis believed that DV is a personal affair, and only 35% believed that the media or social organizations should play an intervening role. Interestingly, the former figure has increased by 5% in the past 11 years, when the survey was first conducted (Ibid). This findings reflect this, as the respondents acknowledged that while perhaps no one would outrightly admit that a man hitting a woman is acceptable, when it comes to talking about real examples and dismantling the root causes which have resulted in DV being so widespread in society, people get uncomfortable and dismiss it as a private issue.

### 5.1.3 Belief that DVAW is Sanctioned by Religion

Religion also plays an important role in all aspects of Pakistani society and serves as a powerful instrument of control at the political level, the community level as well as within the household sphere (Macey, 2010; Kamal, 2013). Unsurprisingly, in most of the interviews religion and its misuse is identified as a significant reason for why DV pervades Pakistani society.

#### *Adding Fuel to Fire: The Role Played by Religious Leaders*

Some respondents emphasized that women are granted complete rights by religion, but they are neither recognized nor administered in practice by men. Zia (2018) explains that the issue of DVAW remains contentious in Pakistan because people believe that religion allows for it. The Quran is interpreted and presented in a way which justifies men's superiority and authority over women and condones the physical chastisement of the wife (Ibid).

Religious leaders in Pakistan often have a strong following and their actions and words tend to influence the public at large (Obeid et al., 2010). When Covid-19 first hit Pakistan, a highly prominent and revered religious scholar Tariq Jameel made an intrinsically problematic statement on national television, claiming that the pandemic is the result of the 'wrongdoing' and 'immodest actions' of women (Dawn, 2020a). Although he extended an apology for his statement a short while later, his position in society makes it dangerous for him to issue sexist statements such as blaming women for a global pandemic, especially when DVAW has been increasing significantly during this time (Dawn, 2020b).

### 5.1.4 Institutional Sexism: The Fault Lies in the System at Large

The respondents also identified the role of politicians as essential in how the issue of DVAW is treated legally and socially in Pakistani society. Recently, Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan publicly stated that the increase in sexual violence and rape cases in Pakistan is the result of widespread "*obscenity*" in the society, as he placed the onus on women to observe *pardah* (covering up) because not everyone can "*resist temptation*" (Al Jazeera, 2021). This caused an uproar in some segments of the society as the PM has been called out on his rape apologist stance (Ibid).

Silence and inaction on DV, especially by those in powerful positions who can make a difference, results from social and economic privilege (Stanko, 2006). Despite the low levels of reporting (Hadi, 2018), DVAW is highly visible in the society. As was stated by one study respondent, everyone knows someone who has been subjected to abuse at home. However, it is the politicians, practitioners and the public who distort its visibility and its impact (Ibid). Thus, the attitude of official institutions and criminal justice practices greatly influence the prevalence of VAW in a society (Carlson, 1984).

### *Legislation Lacks Implementation*

All the interviewees emphasized that within the last decade, Pakistan has achieved important legal milestones as noteworthy legislation regarding VAW has come into force. With KPK being the last of the four provinces to finally pass a law on DV earlier this year, all provinces of Pakistan now have legislation criminalizing DV (Dawn, 2021). However, even though Pakistani legislation is moving in the right direction, there remain gaping holes in their implementation (Ibid).

This was clearly reflected by all study respondents, who stressed the need for a correct and complete implementation of the laws as a paramount step to curbing the issue of DV in Pakistan. For instance, even though the Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act was passed in 2013, it only saw its first conviction in 2019 (Malkani, 2019). This shows that convictions are still extremely low for cases of DV (Ibid).

Nadeem who works with human rights cases explained that despite having relevant legislation, law enforcement officials fail to enforce it. He gave an example of a DV case of psychological abuse, where even though the pertaining law in question clearly covered it as part of DV, the police refused to file an FIR because they did not deem psychological abuse to actually be violence. He also added that officials often lack adequate and gender-sensitive training to deal with cases of DVAW, and that in this case there was no one to evaluate whether the survivor suffered from psychological abuse and therefore it was easier to dismiss the case from the start.

## *DV Seen as a Private Affair: ‘We Don't Air Our Dirty Laundry’*

Institutional and legal bodies in Pakistan are plagued with gender bias as socially embedded patriarchal values have seeped into the institutional level. Law enforcement bodies, such as the police, often play the role of mediators instead of offering adequate protection to survivors (Ali et al., 2014). Nadeem gave an example of a woman who suffered incessant abuse at the hands of her father and brothers and yet the police ‘advised’ her to solve the issue at home, refusing to file her complaint until after several tries. This illustrates that legal institutions fail to take the cases of DV seriously, which is also a significant reason behind the low-level of reporting of DV cases in Pakistan (Hadi, 2018).

This systemic gender-based discrimination in official institutions is particularly clear in cases concerning trans-gender persons, who face regular social, legal, and institutional discrimination (Bari 2020b). Alishba, a prominent gender-rights’ activist stated in her interview that the trans-gender community in Pakistan struggles to get even the most basic of human rights. She further stated that for them, violence was not limited to the domestic sphere but was often also propagated through the outside community and official bodies, especially the police.

Therefore, it can be seen that the strikingly high prevalence of DVAW in Pakistan is the result of patriarchal hegemony reinforced by sociocultural and religious norms, which permeates through social and institutional structures and has resulted in deep-rooted gender inequalities and discrimination against women at all levels of society. The following section examines how these factors have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic so far.

## **5.2 Factors Contributing to the Rise in DVAW Amid Covid-19**

This section illustrates how women in Pakistan have been affected by the rise in DV amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **5.2.1 Women Trapped Together with their Abusers**

The study respondents all affirmed that the ongoing consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, including lockdowns, work-from-home situations and loss of jobs have resulted in survivors of DV being trapped with their abusers with little chances of relief or escape. This situation is seen

as one of the biggest contributory factors for rising DVAW during Covid-19 in Pakistan (Ashraf et al., 2021; Kamal, 2020; Manzoor and Bukhari, 2020). According to the findings, women in Pakistan already lack control in physical and digital spaces and this became more evident during the pandemic. As one interviewee puts it:

*...I think it's an indictment for how unsafe the home is, you can't really talk about it enough. This myth of the home being this sanctuary or a safe place for women, that really got shattered, very quickly, as soon as people were sort of forced to stay home (Salma, 9 February).*

Due to existing patriarchal structures governing gender rights and mobility in Pakistan, women are expected to remain within the private domestic realm whereas men are meant to be outdoors, whether for work or socializing (Ali et. al, 2011; Zia, 2018). However, during the lockdown periods in Pakistan, men became immobile, resulting in increased frustrations because many men are not used to being indoors for extended periods of time. Consequently, those men who already engaged in abusive behavior saw more opportunity for perpetuating violence on the women in the household (Dugan et al., 2003).

According to the findings, women's personal space and agency is further compromised during this time as the control exerted by men, especially husbands, increases and their actions are scrutinized at all times. This further hinders women's access to reach out for help in case of abuse or violence. One interviewee stated that their helpline received calls from women who were hiding in places like the cupboard to make the call, because their abuser was always in near proximity.

Moreover, a harrowing detail that came up during one interview is that abusers are quick to adapt their ways of inflicting abuse to fit the situation of having people around more often than usual. The interviewee explains that:

*Previously, the abuser might throw things around or pick something up to hit her with. Now instead, he would use his hands or physical power to inflict pain; he would twist her*

*arm, or pinch her hard, or call her in the room and do something to her body which makes her feel disgraced...They adapted very quickly to modify their ways and started coming up with new and different ways to torment the survivor and inflict pain on her (Shaheen, 6 February).*

Moreover, the findings show that the apparent rise in DV during Covid-19 is mostly from women in urban areas. According to one interviewee, a possible reason for this is that women and men in rural areas often work in fields and they continue to do so even during the pandemic, hence they are not trapped together for long periods of time. Nevertheless, the interviewees acknowledged that DV is faced by women all over in Pakistan, and there is no real divide between rural or urban women. Some interviewees stated that a rise in DV during the pandemic can be more easily highlighted by urban women because they usually have better access to material and financial resources, such as a smartphone, which enables them to reach out to helplines or report it.

Similarly, another illuminating finding from the interviews is that the trans-gender community, including trans-women, have not yet faced a severe rise in DV during the pandemic per se, even though other types of violence have increased for them. According to the findings, a reason for this is that since the trans-gender community faces immense social exclusion and discrimination from society at large, including by their families, many of them stop living with their families from a young age, which removes them from the setting where household violence can be perpetrated.

Furthermore, the findings show that there has been a notable increase in sexual violence in marital relationships. Many interviewees attribute this to the fact that because women and men are now in the same space for long periods of time, men assumed women are always available for sex. Faiza, a women's right activist, explained in her interview that women's agency and decision-making ability over their sex lives has been hampered significantly during this time. Additionally, Uroosa whose organization works with sexual and gender minorities, stated that the research conducted by her organization during Covid-19 has shown a significant increase in cases of unsolicited and unsafe sex, resulting in unwanted pregnancies as well. She observed that

many women are unaware of their basic rights and needs because of the taboo surrounding sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in Pakistan and they rely on organizations for basic provisions such as contraceptive pills. However, during the pandemic women have been lacking access to contraceptives and other SRHR services, which has impacted their sex lives negatively.

### 5.2.2 Restricted Mobility and Access to Services

Even though Pakistan did not see a complete lockdown, a partial lockdown implemented across the country meant that many essential services such as public transportation were restricted (The Express Tribune, 2020). Consequently, those who are stuck indoors with their abusers are severely limited in their ability to seek help from the outside. In line with the unequal gender norms in the society, the interviewees highlighted that many women are highly dependent on men for their mobility, which has further heightened during the pandemic. This also results in social isolation as women are cut off from their usual social and peer network which are outside the realm of their immediate family and household.

Restrictions to mobility have also affected women's ability to access services such as resource shelters. Moreover, many interviewees emphasized that service providers such as shelters and safe houses are unable to operate at full capacity during the pandemic, because of a lack of resources and the need to adhere to SOPs, such as social distancing. This further restricts survivors' options to escape their abusive environment and contributes to their isolation. In her interview, Shaheen described two examples of DV cases where she tried to arrange for the survivors to move into shelter homes, but one shelter was not receiving anyone because of Covid, while the other one required a negative test result as well as a two-week quarantine before being admitted to the shelter. She stated that most women's shelters and resource centers in Pakistan were completely unprepared and under-resourced to operate during the pandemic, even though that is when they were most needed as DV was rising all over the country.

### 5.2.3 Increase in Care Burden

In Pakistan, women already do about 11 times more household work than men (UN Women, 2019b) and the findings showed that this disproportionate burden of care work has increased



exponentially during the pandemic. More than half of the interviewees emphasized that, now that all household members are forced to stay at home including children and extended family members such as in-laws, unpaid care work including domestic chores and home-schooling has increased multifold for women. The findings reveal that this paves the way for rising violence within the household, as *‘the care work increased a lot and when women resisted, they were beaten up’* (Uroosa, 23 February).

The copious increase in domestic work is mostly shouldered by women because the patriarchal setting of Pakistani families has well-established gender roles where domestic chores are seen to be a woman’s job (Ali et. al, 2011; Capaldi et al., 2012). According to social constructivist feminism, there are no inherent, pre-defined distinctions between the role for men and women in the household (Haslanger, 2000), but patriarchal societies such as Pakistan adhere to these rigid gender divisions. Moreover, a finding from the interviews shows that because men normally do not contribute much to domestic work and childcare, their frustrations increase as they spend more time at home and many of the fights are about parenting issues.

#### 5.2.4 Technology-A Blessing turned into a Curse during Covid-19

The findings indicated that, in light of the lockdown and social isolation, instances of technology-related violence have also risen during the pandemic. Salma, who works at Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) which focuses on cyber harassment, described the different ways in which men use technology to exert control and dominance over women. She stated that the cases of tech abuse received by DRF are often linked with DV, and they have seen an increase in such cases since the start of the pandemic. A major reason for this, according to her, is that technology is used by abusers as an isolating mechanism. This individual level social isolation renders women more susceptible to DV (Carlson, 1984). By taking away a survivor’s access to technology the perpetrator can cut her off from her support network instantly, making it impossible to call for help.

#### 5.2.5 Financial and other Mental Stressors Contributing to DVAW

Perhaps one of the most evident impacts of the pandemic has been unemployment or fear of loss of jobs in people all over the world, which is one of the most significant factors contributing to

the rise in DV during Covid-19 (Nicola, 2020). A key finding which emerged from the interviews was that the increase in mental stress has led to more DV, especially because those in the position of power, usually men, take out their frustrations on those in a more vulnerable position, usually women and children in the household (Anderson, 1997). The respondents reflected that men traditionally assume the role of the breadwinner in the household. In this light, financial instability may lead to a “*a crisis of masculinity*” when the male head is unable to provide for the family, and so “*a lot of that ends up in violence*” (Salma, 9 February). This has also been confirmed by a study on spousal DV in India (Krishnan et al., 2010) which has similar cultural and societal dynamics as Pakistan.

The findings also showed that as providers of the family, men face additional financial pressures related to the lifestyle shift brought forth by the pandemic, such as children needing more expensive technology like laptops to keep up with online schooling. Economic and financial stressors lead to an increase in violence within the household (Riggs et al., 2000; Capaldi et al., 2012). In circumstances where men are unable to fulfil the requirements and expectations which are tied to their status as the male head of the family, they resort to violence to regain their threatened social status and power hierarchy in the household (Heilman and Barker, 2018; Heise 1998; Jewkes, 2002).

A noteworthy finding from the interviews showed that loss of employment by women also resulted in an increase in DV. An example of this was quoted during an interview, where a woman who lived with her brother was told to leave the house upon losing her job because of the pandemic, as she was no longer contributing financially and there was no guarantee how long the pandemic would last. A study on gender-specific unemployment rates found similar results which showed that female unemployment increases the risk for DV (Anderberg et al., 2013).

Moreover, the findings reflected that DV is also perpetuated by the in-laws in light of economic struggles and limited resources during the pandemic. This resonates with research which shows that large families and insufficient resources may result in increased household violence (Capaldi et al., 2012). One study respondent described a class of cases where the husband lives abroad and

has suffered economic losses such as unemployment amid Covid-19, and the wife is subjected to violence at home at the hands of his family.

According to the respondents, once women gain a powerful position in the household, usually as mothers-in-law, they start contributing to the cycle of DV either as silent viewers or even as perpetrators of violence. It can be difficult to break this cycle and research has shown that those who are victims of domestic abuse are likely to later become perpetrators as well (Riggs et. al, 2000; Capaldi et. al, 2012). This finding struggles to fit seamlessly within the feminist lens through which this study is approached, as one of the main criticisms of feminist theories on DV is that they do not coherently explain female perpetrated DV (Carrington, 2013; Schneider, 1992). While the respondents accorded this to power, the author further interprets this as internalized sexism caused by a deeply patriarchal and sexist environment which may result in some women projecting violence and abuse on other women (Bearman, Korobov and Thorne, 2009; Cannon, Lauve-Moon and Buttell, 2015). There is, however, a lack of empirical data on this theory, and it is recommended that future research on female perpetration of DV can further explore this within the realm of feminist perspectives on the issue (Ibid).

Another revealing finding that surfaced during an interview with Uroosa was that during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, baseless religious beliefs related to the pandemic caused fear and stress among many, which have contributed to the increase in DV during this time. She explained that a majority of people, especially those with low levels of education, follow religious leaders blindly who themselves are usually poorly educated and often resort to religion to incite fear. False information was spread during this time, such as that the pandemic is a sign that the Day of Judgement is near, which caused panic and fear within many, and *“that fear was constant, and the manifestation was in terms of beating their wives or daughters”* (Uroosa, 23 February).

The findings therefore indicate that certain factors, such as social isolation, restricted mobility and access to support networks, and mental and financial stressors aggravated existing gender inequalities within Pakistani society, thus creating a conducive environment for violence within the household during the pandemic. However, some of these main factors were seen across

countries. For instance, in terms of restricted access to support services for DV survivors, Italy saw a 55% drop in calls to a DV helpline during March 2020, and the north of France saw a similar reduction in calls to a women's shelter network (UN Women, 2020a). Similarly, the pandemic revealed that the support system for VAW survivors is weak in many countries worldwide. For example, despite the known fact that DV increases during emergencies, no country within the European Union had a contingency plan in action for this (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

Nevertheless, the study findings showed that certain factors which led to an increase in DVAW during Covid-19 were contextually specific to Pakistan, such as living arrangements with extended family such as in-laws, a strict adherence to gender roles within the household and women's disempowerment and high dependency on their male counterparts. In light of these impacts of Covid-19 on DV in Pakistan, the next section explores the role of CSOs to support DV survivors during this time.

## 5.3 Managing DVAW During Covid-19 – The Role of CSOs

### 5.3.1 Reaching Out Through Online Platforms

The findings revealed that many CSOs and government institutions such as the Human Rights Commission Pakistan (HRCP) received an increase in cases of DV since the country first went into partial lockdown from April 1, 2020. In her interview, Adila confirmed that the number of calls received on their organization's helpline doubled during April to June 2020, in comparison to data from January to March 2020.

A notable finding was that DRF, which specifically works on cyber harassment and not with DV cases, received a 189 percent increase in calls on their helpline, and many of them were from women who were experiencing DV (UN ESCAP, 2020). Salma from DRF explained that state-led cutbacks on the civil society community and welfare programs have left survivors of DVAW with fewer options, so they reach out to prominent organizations which are well-known nationwide and have an active social media presence, such as DRF.

Salma further revealed that when a survivor of DV reached out to their helpline for support, the organization would analyze the urgency of the situation and make an informed decision before calling the police. This was largely due to the distrust in police when it comes to cases of DV (Hadi, 2018). This lack of trust in the police therefore discourages women to seek support through a formal channel (Ibid). Furthermore, the organizations recognize that involving the police might put the survivor in more danger in terms of retaliation violence, as protective interventions might lead to more aggression in the perpetrator (Dugan et al., 2003).

Moreover, CSOs also collaborated with governmental institutions to launch online support services for survivors of violence. The Ministry of Human Rights (MOHR) introduced a toll-free helpline during the pandemic for reporting abuse. Moreover, CSOs in collaboration with government institutions launched safety apps for DVAW, to increase reporting and access to support services (Imran, 2021; Saeed, 2020).

Many organizations also utilized social media platforms to disseminate information and publicize their services such as a helpline number, where those who are experiencing DV or know of someone who is, can reach out. The NGO Bedari used social media channels to raise awareness about DV (See Figure 2)



*Figure 2. Screenshot of an online DV information campaign (Source: Bedari/Facebook)*

### 5.3.2 Referral Services and Psychosocial Support

Many organizations focused on individual level support for survivors, such as providing counselling and advice about referral services. Psychological interventions are proven to reduce negative impacts of abuse in survivors (Eckhardt et al., 2013). Bedari's support staff includes psychologists and pro bono lawyers who are readily available to provide support to DV survivors, especially during the pandemic. Similarly, even though DRF does not work with survivors of DV directly, they remained attentive to calls from DV survivors during the pandemic and depending on the severity and urgency of the situation at hand, provided assistance such as calling the police or connecting them with other relevant authorities for help.

Uroosa from Forum for Dignity Initiatives (FDI) highlighted that their organization saw many cases where people's mental health was suffering during the pandemic. According to her, this is especially true for women and the LGBTQI community, who face a higher degree of depression and risk of DV during this time (Bettinger-Lopez and Bro, 2020). Therefore, FDI introduced online counselling services by professionals where one could receive a personal session ranging between half an hour to an hour, once or twice a week. Uroosa added that they were able to get grants from their donors for these sessions initially during the lockdown, but eventually had to cut back because of a lack of funding and resources. Psychological support and referral services by CSOs are efficacious responsive and preventive measures for DV survivors (Condino et al., 2016).

In a broader level approach, the NGO Bedari ran a radio program for two months (May and June 2020) during the lockdown in Pakistan, where professionals such as doctors and psychologists came on to spread awareness about Covid-19 and advise how to care for one's mental health during this time. The program also advised on dealing with relationship issues which may arise because of spending more time together, and men were advised to spend more time helping with household chores. Promoting gender equality is crucial to preventing DVAW in society (WHO, 2009) and such community level interventions are needed to dispel the stigma surrounding issues of mental health and DV (Jayatilleke et al., 2015).

### 5.3.3 Provision of Supplies

The civil society distributed relief packages to vulnerable groups, such as women and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The executive director of Bedari stated that they provided hygiene and basic food supply kits during the pandemic. She further described that their intervention targeted only women as beneficiaries, explaining that according to her professional experience, DV may decrease when women contribute materially or monetarily in the household. Presumably, this may relieve financial stress faced by men which is otherwise expressed through violence (Jewkes, 2002; Vyas and Watts, 2009).

### 5.3.4 Awareness Raising and Capacity Building

The civil society has also been focusing on awareness raising and capacity building during the pandemic. Arifa stated that her foundation has been focusing on community-led awareness-raising initiatives with women in KPK, related to Covid-19 and the increase in DV that they might face during this time. Moreover, there were initiatives to get identity cards for thousands of women in the province as an important step towards their empowerment. This will also enable these women to register for the Covid-19 vaccine, as having a national identity card is a prerequisite for it (Zakaria, 2021).

Moreover, Shaheen who specializes in sexual and gender-based violence, held gender-sensitivity training sessions during the pandemic, for service providers such as women's shelters workers and others who handle the medico-legal side of VAW cases. Working on a larger scale, UN Women focused on capacity-building and resource provision for their partners and key frontline service providers to respond to and prevent violence. They also worked with CSOs such as DRF so that during these unprecedented times, they were equipped to deal with DV cases even if it was not their usual forte.

Furthermore, UN Women upgraded five women's shelters in three provinces, based on a capacity assessment carried out in 2019, to ensure that they were accessible to all women, including those with disabilities. Additionally, on the basis of a needs' assessment, they created a manual on attitude change for the police force and provisioned related training sessions for 500 police officers in the three provinces of Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan, in 2020. Interventions,

whether state-led or by CSOs, focused on enhancing capacity, promoting awareness about women's human rights, and sensitizing legal and justice systems are integral community and societal level prevention acts to curb this issue (WHO, 2005; WHO 2009).

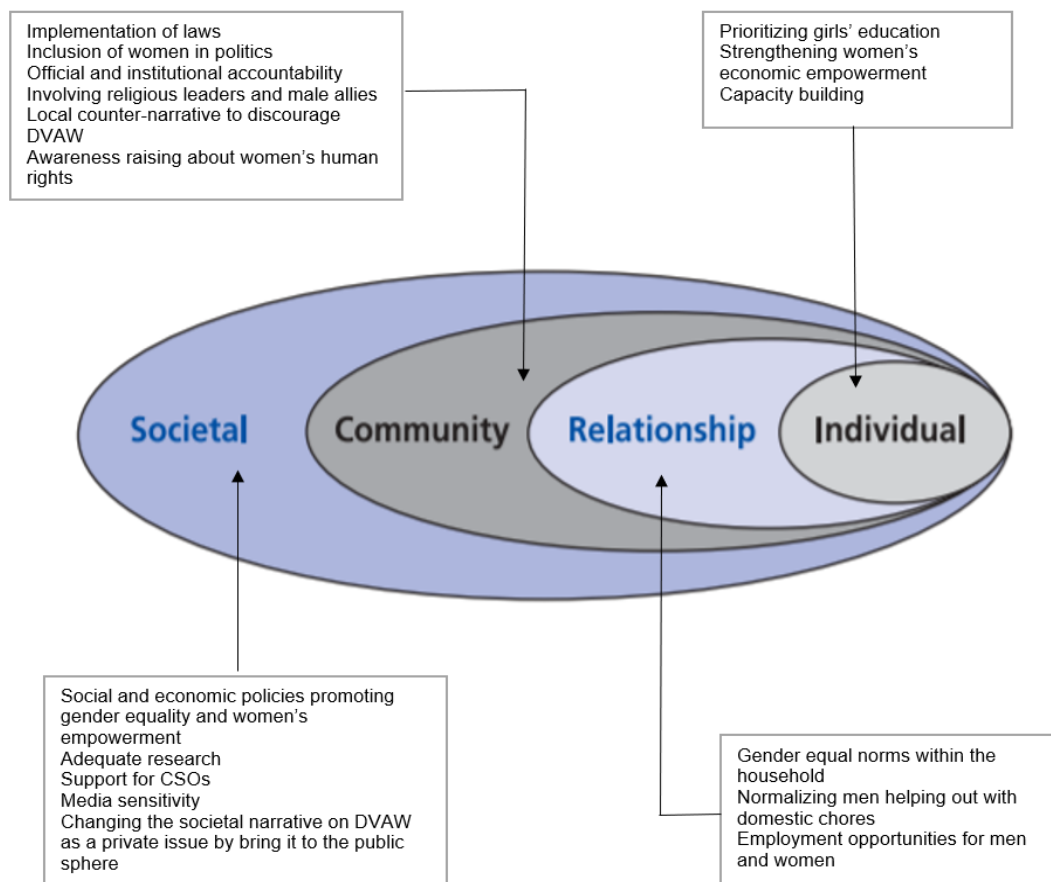
### 5.3.5 Research

Although this is still an ongoing process, many organizations have been collecting data about the rise in VAW, including DV, during Covid-19 in Pakistan. FDI, for instance, has prepared a rapid assessment report based on a qualitative survey, on the effects of Covid-19 on SRHR services for young people from sexual and gender minorities in Pakistan (FDI, 2020). Similarly, DRF has published an assessment report of DVAW-related support helplines in Pakistan (DRF and Chayn, 2020). In their multi-country report on DV and VAW, WHO (2005) emphasized on the need and importance for research across different countries and cultures to guide further preventative measures.

## 5.4 Future Practice and Policy Implications

As this study aims to show, the rise in DVAW has not occurred in a vacuum during the pandemic but rather is a culmination of many underlying factors which permeate through the different layers of Pakistani society. Therefore, multi-sectoral preventative and responsive measures for curbing DVAW in Pakistan are needed to address the prevalent factors at the individual, community, and societal levels (Heise, 1998; Kaur and Garg, 2008; Tekkas Kerman and Betrus, 2018).





*Figure 3. Key needed measures at different levels (Source: Modified figure created by the author of the thesis based on the Ecological Framework by Heise, 1998)*

The findings of this study show that in Pakistan's case, change needs to start from the top. This is because although gender inequality and discrimination occur within relationships, they are entrenched in wider community and societal structures (Tekkas Kerman and Betrus, 2018). The findings highlight the need for the proper implementation of laws protecting women's rights, inclusion of women in politics, accountability of officials for their sexist and misogynistic public statements, gender-sensitive training of service providers and law enforcement bodies, and adequate budget allocation for services such as shelter homes. All these interventions are proven to help curb VAW (WHO, 2005; WHO, 2009). Additionally, the need for women's empowerment was emphasized during the interviews, such as ensuring the education of girls and women, supporting awareness-raising initiatives for women's rights, and creating employment opportunities. This is imperative, as research shows that empowering women is fundamental to ensure the elimination of VAW in a society (Ibid; Heise and Ellsburg, 1999).

The interviewees also recognized the conspicuous importance of religious leaders in Pakistan and acknowledged that garnering their support is crucial for making effective and lasting change in this regard. Similarly, there was emphasis on the need to involve men as feminist allies because they hold an all too important standing in Pakistani society. In patriarchal societies, it is imperative to change the acceptance of DVAW among men (Tekkas Kerman and Betrus, 2018). Moreover, for a society which holds the concept of honor and shame dear, the narrative needs to change in a way to associate shame and dishonor with DVAW (Ibid). Other findings highlighted an immediate need for extensive research on the issue of VAW in Pakistan, given the dearth of adequate data available on a national level. The interviewees stressed that targeted interventions, evaluating impacts and policy change are all based on concrete data and research. Moreover, the accounts and lived experiences of survivors of DV, gathered through research, can contribute to an inclusive and non-hierarchical policy formation on the issue (Malbon, Carson and Yates, 2018; Stanko, 2006).

The findings also show that mass media, especially drama serials on television, play an important role when it comes to social issues and the representation of women in Pakistani society (Ali et al, 2011). These serials remain within the realm of cultural propriety and reinforce cultural stereotypes, as female characters are depicted positively if she is docile and acquiescent, whereas a more empowered, career-oriented and worldly woman is often the home-breaker or the villain (Naseer, 2020; Ahmar, 2012). These serials hold the power to open discursive avenues for the development of culture, especially regarding women's place in a religious and patriarchal society (Kothari, 2005).

All interviewees affirmed that the ultimate responsibility lies on the state to protect its citizens in all circumstances, and the civil society's role is to provide additional support. In this regard, the government needs to support the civil society so there is opportunity, space, and the means for civil society actors to work for the development of the country. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was consensus amongst the interviewees that the initiatives taken by CSOs to address the rise in DV during this time has been insufficient. There seem to be multiple reasons for this, including state-led austerity measures directed towards the development sector, and the

lack of preparedness to deal with a pandemic. Many interviewees stated that the focus during Covid-19 has been on tackling the virus and addressing issues such as hunger and poverty, which is why many initiatives at state level and by CSOs are focused on administering food and supply provisions to those in need. Consequently, the issue of rising DV during this time has not received much attention.

A survey by Michau et al. (2015) of VAW policies in 70 different countries over 40 years shows that civil society action is central in getting governments to address this issue. Importantly, CSOs in Pakistan are striving to change the narrative that DVAW is a private issue, which is in line with the feminist approach (McPhail et.al, 2007). A glistening example of this is the Aurat March (women's march), an annual event organized by the civil society with a different manifesto every time advocating for women's rights, including addressing DVAW in Pakistan (Ali and Gabol, 2021). Despite its continuous opposition from religious and conservative hardliners, the March saw its fourth year in 2021 as feminists and allies marched against the 'pandemic of patriarchy' in major cities of Pakistan and demanded an increase in health budget and women's better access to healthcare (See Figure 4 below) (Ahmed, 2021). This embodies the spirit and struggle of the civil society of Pakistan who, despite their unfavorable odds, are trying to change the system and fight for gender equality and human rights.



Aurat March 2021 in Islamabad. The banner says 'Free women means free society.' Image via Facebook group Aurat Azadi March, used with permission.

Women protested on [International Women's Day](#) in Pakistan to reclaim their space in society, speak up for their rights, and demand justice from the system that has failed them because of patriarchal structures. This year, the Aurat March (Women's March) protests also focused on the damage caused by the [COVID-19 outbreak in Pakistan](#). Calling it a "Pandemic of Patriarchy," the protesters demanded the government [increase](#) the health budget to 5 per cent of GDP so that women may get better healthcare.

*Figure 4. Excerpt from an online media article reporting on the Aurat March (Source: Ahmed, 2021)*

Therefore, the author contends that the issue of DVAW in Pakistan needs to be tackled at the root, and targeted interventions to change the narrative of gender inequality, patriarchy and sexism at community and societal level are lasting solutions to prevent and curtail this issue (Michau et al., 2015; Heise and Ellsberg, 1999). Once women gain an equal status as men in society, and a complete recognition and protection of their human rights is administered, only then can the old age phenomenon of DVAW be seen as a social aberration and not treated as something invisible, or worse, as something normal.

## 6. Conclusion

Research, both previously existing and forthcoming, has established that DVAW is widespread all over the world. There is also precedence that DVAW increases markedly during times of crisis. However, in order to truly understand, address and eliminate this issue there is an utmost need to identify the root causes which enable a prevailing environment for DVAW. Guided by feminist perspectives in conjunction with EF, this thesis adds to research by showing how existing contributory factors at different micro, meso and macro levels for the high prevalence of DVAW in Pakistan were further exacerbated during Covid-19. The findings from empirical data and an analytical review of existing literature confirm that the phenomenon of DVAW in Pakistan is entrenched in persisting patriarchal values and congruent sociocultural and religious norms. Factors such as women's lack of education and awareness of their rights, economic disempowerment, cultural and religious reinforcement of women's subordination and men's dominance, overarching societal silence on the issue, and largely inefficient legal and institutional frameworks have enabled a conducive environment for high levels of DVAW in Pakistan, which was further exacerbated during the pandemic.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has rang alarming bells as a frightening increase in DV levels is seen across countries worldwide. What became apparent during this time is the need for adequate services for survivors of DVAW, as well as a well-resourced civil society sector which is equipped to respond to the rise in DVAW during emergencies. This study shows that while CSOs in Pakistan are taking considerable steps to deal with rising levels of DVAW during the pandemic, their initiatives remain insufficient as the state needs to take active steps to address and eliminate this issue. There needs to be an allocation of adequate resources to the civil society sector so they are able to support the government in realizing the 2030 Agenda and eliminating VAW in Pakistan. The 2030 Agenda, specifically in SDG 5 has made it clear that the safety and protection of women and girls is imperative for a country's sustainable development (UN, 2015). Pakistan can only fully progress if it recognizes that the women in the country are an asset and their rights are recognized and safeguarded.

This thesis paves the way for further research in the area of gender inequalities and how they are aggravated during extraordinary situations, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, not just in Pakistan but in other contexts as well. For research on DVAW and Covid-19, primary data collection directly from the survivors will provide a much-needed insight in the issue. Moreover, there is an opportunity to adopt an intersectional lens and conduct in-depth research on how this pandemic has affected different classes of women, especially those who work in the informal sector which enhances their vulnerable situation (Bari, 2020a). Finally, the findings from this study show that there is a dearth of research and national data on important gender issues in Pakistan. Prioritizing research on VAW and improving empirical data collection to close the knowledge gap on existing gender inequalities in Pakistan will propel lasting and positive change towards more inclusive and preventative measures to reduce DVAW through CSO programming, national policies, and law enforcement.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A- Map of Pakistan



Source: <https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/pakistan>

## Appendix B- Participant and Interview Details

| Participant Name    | Participant Role   | Participant Area of Work                  | Interview Date   | Interview Duration | Interview Language        |
|---------------------|--|---|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Sadia*              | Legal Head at Women Aid Trust NGO  | Punjab                                    | 21 January 2021  | 22 minutes         | Urdu                      |
| Arifa*              | Founder and Executive Director at Pak Women NGO  | KPK                                       | 22 January 2021  | 30 minutes         | Urdu                      |
| Sameena*            | Portfolio Manager for ending violence against women, Governance and Human Rights at UN Women Pakistan                  | All over Pakistan                         | 26 January 2021  | 45 minutes         | English                   |
| Shaheen*            | SGBV specialist; previous work experience with many local and international NGOs                                       | Punjab                                    | 6 February 2021  | 65 minutes         | A mix of English and Urdu |
| Salma*              | Research and Policy Director at Digital Rights Foundation  | All over Pakistan, with a focus in Punjab | 9 February 2021  | 42 minutes         | English                   |
| Faiza*              | Human rights activist; previous co-chair of Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Alliance                           | All over Pakistan                         | 11 February 2021 | 41 minutes         | A mix of Urdu and English |
| Adila*              | Executive Director at Bedari NGO   | Punjab                                    | 16 February 2021 | 37 minutes         | Urdu                      |
| Alishba and Khushi* | Co-founders of Wajood, a local NGO for transgender rights  | Punjab                                    | 17 February 2021 | 37 minutes         | A mix of Urdu and English |
| Nadeem*             | Employed at Sindh Rural Partner Organization and volunteers at Human Rights Commission Pakistan for human rights cases | Sindh                                     | 21 February 2021 | 110 minutes        | Urdu                      |
| Uroosa*             | Executive Director at Forum for Dignity Initiatives working for sexual and gender minorities                           | Punjab and Balochistan                    | 23 February 2021 | 38 minutes         | English                   |

\*Pseudonyms have been assigned to the participants to protect their identity.

## Appendix C- Interview Guide

Q1: Where do you currently work and in what capacity?

Q2: Can you please describe the organization you are a part of, including the kind of work you do?

Q3: Have you ever worked with survivors of domestic violence in Pakistan? If yes, where, for how long and in what capacity?

Q4: How common and widespread is the problem of domestic violence against women and girls in Pakistan?

Q5: What forms of domestic violence against women are most common in Pakistan?  
(Please give specific examples of cases of physical, sexual, psychological or economic abuse).

Q6: Why do you think domestic violence against women and girls is so highly prevalent in Pakistan?

Q7: Do you think there is a difference between women living in rural areas and women living in urban areas, in terms of facing domestic violence?

Q8: How do you think domestic violence against women is perceived in the Pakistani society?

Q9: Would you say the issue of domestic violence against women has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic? If yes, by how much/how is that visible for your organization? If no, how come?

Q10: What factors do you think have contributed to the increase in domestic violence against women during Covid-19?

Q11: Has your foundation taken any steps to address the issue of rising domestic violence against women and girls during covid 19? If yes, in what way, please give examples, If no, why not?

Q12: Have CSOs and/or NGOs in Pakistan as an institutional community/sector taken any measures to address this issue during the pandemic? If yes, how? If no, why not??

Q13: If yes, what impacts of the interventions taken by CSOs/NGOs have you seen so far?

Q14: What more needs to be done to curb the issue of domestic violence in Pakistan?

Q15: What role does the Pakistan government have to play in addressing domestic violence against girls and women?

Q16: Have there been any benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic linked to the work to reduce and prevent domestic violence against girls and women in Pakistan?

## Appendix D-Information and Consent Form

### Interview Consent Form

**Research project title:** Master's Thesis: Examining the Impact of Covid-19 on Domestic Violence against Women in Pakistan.

**Research investigator:** Zara Jan

**About the researcher:** I am a Master's student studying International Development and Management at Lund University, Sweden. My Master's thesis aims to analyze the reasons behind the increase in domestic violence levels against women in Pakistan, during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this research, I will be examining why the issue of domestic violence is prevalent in Pakistan, what factors have contributed to the increase in domestic violence against women during Covid-19, and the role civil society actors have played in responding to and preventing this issue.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement, understand how the information contained in the interview will be used, and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying information sheet and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the interview will be conducted online via an e-meeting.
- The interview will be audio recorded and a transcript will be produced.
- The transcript of the interview will be analysed by the interviewer Zara Jan in her capacity as a researcher for this thesis.
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to Zara Jan and academic colleagues and researchers with whom he might collaborate as part of the research process.
- On the consent form you may choose whether you would like your name published or not. Should you be willing to have your answers published with your name, you will be sent the exact quotes, to verify the statements from your side. Should you choose to



remain anonymous, then any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed.

- The results of this study will be published in Zara Jan’s Masters thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals.
- Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer.
- The actual recording will be stored in a safe and secure manner until the thesis is completed and submitted to the university, after which it will be destroyed.
- In case data is collected from third parties through the research participant and not directly by the researcher Zara Jan (for example, if a short questionnaire is conducted with women survivors of domestic violence in Pakistan, administered by the research participant and/or their organization) then the researcher Zara Jan will be responsible for handling the data in an ethical and secure manner by maintaining anonymity and discarding the data upon completion of the Master’s thesis.
- Any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval.

By signing this form I, the research participant, agree that:

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don’t have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time.
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above.
3. I have read the informed consent form.
4. I don’t expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality.
6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher Zara Jan with any questions I may have in the future.

*Signature of participant*

*I consent to the interview being audio recorded.*  *Yes*  *No*

*I consent to having my personal identity disclosed in the products of the research.*  *Yes*  *No*

*I consent to being quoted in the products of the research.*  *Yes*  *No*

Participant Name \_\_\_\_\_ Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_

***Signature of researcher***

I, Zara Jan, promise to adhere to the procedures described in this consent form.

Researcher Signature

Date: