

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST MARRIED WOMEN IN URBAN SRI LANKA, SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS AND SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION**M Wijesekara<sup>1</sup> and W Subasinghe<sup>2</sup>**Abstract**

Domestic Violence (DV), particularly intimate partner violence (IPV) against women, is still a widespread and complex issue, especially in urban settings where social development, economic constraints, and changing gender dynamics are commonplace. The prevalence, trends, and sociocultural variables of intimate partner violence (IPV) among married women in urban Sri Lanka are examined in this desk review, which also examines the institutional and individual elements that support its persistence. Particular focus is given to the role of social work practice in tackling IPV through interventions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The review highlights major obstacles to reporting and seeking help, including stigma, financial dependency, and systemic shortcomings, while emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive, evidence-based, and survivor-focused approaches. The paper concludes by offering recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of social work interventions and policy frameworks in preventing and addressing IPV in urban environments.

**Keywords:** *Domestic violence, Intimate partner violence, Socio-cultural factors, social work intervention, Help-seeking behavior, Evidence-based approaches*

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## Introduction

Over the past few decades, the world has experienced rapid socio-economic and political changes, which have dramatically reshaped societies. One of the alarming outcomes of these global transformations has been the rush in various forms of violence particularly Domestic Violence (DV) against women. While there has been a diversification in the sources of information and an increased understanding of this social issue, domestic violence remains a pervasive problem. Despite sharp public awareness and sensitivity, the prevalence of domestic violence against women continues to bearing a serious challenge, reflecting the complex social dynamics in communities.

## Conceptualizing Domestic Violence (DV) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Domestic violence (DV) against women, often perceived as silent suffering (Farooq, Saeed, Parpio, Lalani, & Marjorie, 2017), refers to the abuse and control used by one individual over another within an intimate relationship. Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence (IPV) or family violence, occurs when one partner seeks to dominate or control the other through various abusive behaviors. The United Nations (1993) defines domestic violence as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."

Domestic violence (DV), also known as intimate partner violence (IPV) or family violence, occurs when one individual seeks to use control over another within an intimate relationship. IPV against married women remains a significant public health concern worldwide, including in Sri Lanka. As Krug et al. (2002) highlight, "one of the most common forms of violence against women is that perpetrated by a husband or an intimate male partner" and the emotional involvement and economic dependence of women on their abusers significantly influence the dynamics of abuse and shape the strategies required to address it. The World Health Organization defines intimate partner violence as any behavior within an intimate relationship that results in physical, psychological, or sexual harm. This includes acts of physical aggression such as slapping, hitting, kicking, and beating; emotional or psychological abuse, including intimidation, constant belittling, and humiliation; sexual violence, such as forced intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion; and various controlling behaviors, such as restricting a woman's mobility, limiting her access to friends and family, monitoring her movements, and decrease her access to information or assistance (García-Moreno et al., 2002). Globally, 1 in 3 women (30%) experience physical or sexual violence by their partner, with 38% of female homicides committed by male partners (Heise, Ellsberg & Gottemoeller, 1999; WHO, 2011). The impact of domestic violence on survivors is profound, leading to immediate and long-term health, economic, and social issues, including low self-esteem, depression, difficulty working, and disrupted relationships (Campbell et al., 2002; Ellsberg et al.). Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is any behavior that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to intimate partners. It is one of the worldwide social dilemmas that negatively affects individuals, families, and the community (W Subasinghe, S Ihalagama, P Wanigasooriya, 2024).

## The prevalence of Intimate partner violence in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, the term "domestic violence" is broadly used to describe various forms of abuse within intimate relationships, including physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse perpetrated by one partner on another. "Intimate partner violence" is generally understood to fall under the broader category of domestic violence (Moreno et al., 2012; Jewkes, 2002). This conceptualization aligns with global efforts to combat domestic violence by recognizing the unique dynamics and challenges faced by individuals in intimate relationships. By using the term "domestic violence" to encompass intimate partner violence in Sri Lanka, the severity and complexity of the issue are acknowledged, emphasizing the need for comprehensive legal, social, and support mechanisms.

The Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005 defines domestic violence in Sri Lanka as any act, omission, or behavior that causes physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm within a domestic relationship. This includes not only spouses and former spouses but also individuals living together in a domestic relationship, parents and children, persons related by blood or marriage, and those in a relationship akin to marriage, regardless of whether they are cohabiting. The Domestic Violence Act provides a comprehensive legal framework for addressing and preventing domestic violence in Sri Lanka. Despite progress in various areas, the prevalence of IPV continues, by a complex relationship of socio-economic, cultural, and systemic factors. Sri Lanka, with its characteristic cultural landscape and urban dynamics, provides a critical context for understanding and addressing IPV.

The prevalence of domestic violence in Sri Lanka is alarmingly high. In the past year, 14.8% experienced physical, 26.3% psychological, and 7.17% sexual abuse (Praveen Reyal, Perera, & Guruge, 2020). Notably, 51% of physical abuse cases involve weapons, highlighting the life-threatening nature of domestic violence (Deraniyagala, 1992). A 2019 survey revealed that 17.4% of Sri Lankan women have experienced violence in their lifetime, with 17% of ever-married women aged 15-49 suffering domestic violence from their marital partner

(Women's Wellbeing Survey, 2019; DHS, 2016). Domestic violence significantly impacts reproductive health, with 43% of women beaten while pregnant and 44% subjected to battering (Moonesinghe, Rajapaksha, & Samarasinghe, 2004). Additionally, one in three female homicides in Sri Lanka is linked to intimate partner violence, with 69% of cases underreported (UNFPA, 2015).

### **Focus on Urban Settings in Sri Lanka**

This research aims to explore strategic approaches to mitigating intimate partner violence (IPV) among married women in urban areas of Sri Lanka. Domestic violence against women in urban Sri Lanka is a complex and deeply rooted issue with far-reaching consequences. It not only perpetrates immediate and long-term harm on survivors but also greatly affects children and families, contributing to cycles of violence across generations (National Report on Violence and Health, 2008). Societal norms, gendered expectations, and the secrecy surrounding domestic violence further unclear efforts to address the problem (Wanasundara, 2000).

The urban setting, characterized by rapid urbanization, cultural diversity, and socio-economic disparities, presents both challenges and opportunities for addressing intimate partner violence (IPV). Data indicates that 49.6% of women in urban areas have experienced some form of abuse. Although this rate is lower than in rural (67.5%) and estate sectors (68.3%), it remains significant, affecting nearly half of the urban female population and justifying the need for focused research (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021).

Urban environments often bring economic and social pressures, including the high cost of living, job-related stress, and fragmented social support systems, which can exacerbate household tensions, leading to domestic violence (Jayasuriya et al., 2011). These factors, specific to urban living, can create environments arranged for both physical and psychological abuse. In urban settings, 52.8% of women reported experiencing psychological abuse, indicating a significant prevalence. While there may not be unambiguous differences between the sectors, psychological control in urban settings may be influenced by socio-economic pressures, employment stress, and societal expectations (Senarath & Gunawardena, 2009). Urban women, often balancing career demands and societal pressure for success, might experience indirect but pervasive forms of psychological abuse. The focus on external appearances, professional achievements, and higher economic status can cover internal domestic issues, making it harder to identify and address psychological abuse (Guedes et al., 2016). Sexual abuse affects 21.7% of women in urban areas, comparable to the rural and estate sectors. However, urban contexts might add layers of complexity, such as underreporting due to concerns over privacy, social image, and anonymity in large cities (Jayasuriya et al., 2011). The perception of social success, and the desire to maintain a certain reputation, can cause urban women to underreport sexual violence. Understanding how the dynamics of sexual abuse evident in urban environments requires more research, as these factors may play a significant role in both the occurrence and the underreporting of such violence (Wickramasinghe, 2014). While only 31.7% of women in urban settings have experienced physical abuse, 15% have reported injuries resulting from this violence. This highlights a serious, although less visible, problem. The tendency for urban women to not seek help may be linked to economic dependence, the stigma surrounding domestic violence, and the lack of supportive social networks in urban environments. Furthermore, reluctance to report abuse may be higher in urban areas where social standing, careers, and privacy are at risk (Senarath & Gunawardena, 2009).

Controlling behaviors by intimate partners are reported by 61.1% of urban women, somewhat lower than in rural and estate areas. However, these behaviors can be more complex in urban contexts, where women's apparent independence due to financial or educational status may mask ongoing control. Such controlling behaviors often persist, driven by cultural expectations, financial manipulation, and emotional coercion, and may be slightly used, complicating detection and intervention (de Mel et al., 2013).

### **Cultural and Structural Influences on Urban Women in Sri Lanka**

Urban women in Sri Lanka face a unique combination of socioeconomic and cultural pressures. The clash between higher employment and better education, and traditional gender norms can create tension (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Furthermore, urban isolation from extended family support systems, which are more prevalent in rural settings, makes it harder for women to escape abusive relationships. The pressure to maintain an image of success in both professional and social spheres further complicates their ability to report or seek help for domestic violence (UNFPA Sri Lanka, 2020). Urban-focused research could better explore how healthcare, legal services, and social support systems respond to these cases.

### **The Hidden Nature of DV and the Need for Intervention DV**

In cases of domestic violence (DV), the issue often remains hidden due to its "secrecy" and the societal invisibility of the problem. Both society and survivors themselves may conceal it, as survivors are often vulnerable and unable to protect themselves, making external intervention crucial for their safety and well-being. Violence in familial

relationships can occur at the micro level, affecting individual families, but it also presents a macro-level problem that requires intervention across all societal levels.

### **Professional Social work plays a pivotal role in mitigating IPV**

Various disciplines and professions have developed different explanations and approaches to intervention depending on the nature of the issue. Psychological analysis tends to focus on the individual, exploring the root causes of DV within the perpetrator or victim. Sociological analysis, on the other hand, examines the causes of domestic violence within the broader social structure.

Given this, addressing domestic violence against women requires a comprehensive psycho-social perspective. This dual approach not only assists survivors in improving their well-being but also addresses the structural issues that negatively impact them. For a meaningful solution, it is essential to develop and implement appropriate psycho-social interventions that both support the survivors and challenge the societal structures that perpetuate domestic violence against women.

This perspective will guide the proposed research in understanding intimate partner violence (IPV) among married women in urban areas of Sri Lanka, focusing on social work interventions that can effectively mitigate the issue at both individual and structural levels. Ultimately, tackling domestic violence against women in an urban setting requires a coordinated effort at both the micro, mezzo and macro levels, involving all sectors of society to create safer, more supportive environments for women and their families.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research seeks to explore strategic social work interventions addressing IPV among married women in urban Sri Lanka. A nuanced understanding of IPV's socio-cultural roots and urban-specific challenges will inform evidence-based, culturally relevant, and multi-level approaches. Ultimately, breaking the cycle of violence requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society.

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