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SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT AS A STRATEGY TO ADDRESS INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN URBAN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence against women remains a persistent issue in urban Sri Lanka, deepened by rapid urbanization, poverty, and entrenched gender roles. This study examines the potential of social empowerment as a sustainable approach to preventing and reducing IPV in these settings. Using a qualitative desk review methodology, the study examines peer-reviewed literature, national policies, and international reports published between 2005 and 2025. Sources were selected through purposive sampling and analyzed thematically to identify core empowerment strategies, including economic support, legal literacy, and emotional resilience. Findings reveal that empowerment-based interventions when supported by social workers, NGOs, and state institutions not only reduce IPV but also challenge harmful gender norms and promote gender equity. Culturally- sensitive, community -driven approaches have been shown to enhance women's decision- making power and social participation, thereby contributing to long term resilience and safety It concludes with recommendations to strengthen empowerment-based strategies and ensure more effective, contextually relevant responses to IPV in Sri Lanka's urban communities.

Keywords: *Domestic violence, Social empowerment, Urban Sri Lanka, Intimate partner violence (IPV), Empowerment-based intervention*

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1. Introduction

Domestic violence against women is a prevalent and deeply rooted human rights violation that continues across socio-economic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. In Sri Lanka, this issue particularly in urban settings, has become an increasingly visible and complex social problem. Urbanization has contributed to the breakdown of traditional support networks, heightened economic pressures, and intensified the stress of modern life all of which worsen intimate partner violence (IPV) (Samarasinghe & Soldatic, 2015). Urban districts such as Colombo, Gampaha, and Kandy have reported a rising incidence of IPV. However, these figures likely represent only a fraction of actual cases due to prevailing stigma, fear, and weak institutional response mechanisms (UNFPA, 2020).

While the enactment of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005 provided a legal avenue for protection orders and criminal action against perpetrators, serious systematic challenges persist. These include gaps in implementation, limited survivor protection, undertrained law enforcement, and poor coordination with social services (Goonesekere & Amarasuriya, 2013). As a result, legal mechanisms alone are insufficient to address the structural, cultural, and psychosocial roots of domestic violence. There is an urgent need to move beyond protection-based strategies towards holistic intervention that targets the abroader socio-economic dimensions of IPV in urban Sri Lanka.

In this context, social empowerment offers a transformative framework that is grounded in the enhancement of individual agency, and equitable access to resources, meaning full participation in decision-making, and collective action to address social injustice (Kabeer, 1999). This approach reframes women not merely as victims of abuse but as active agents capable of confronting oppressive systems and reshaping their life paths. Empowerment is multidimensional, encompassing not only economic independence but also psychological social legal and political dimensions (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). Empowered women are likely to recognize abuse, seek help, mobilize support networks, and contribute to systemic change within their communities

Urban Sri Lanka, provides a capable context for implementing empowerment-based strategies. Women are increasingly engaged in informal economic activities, microfinance programs, and grassroots mobilization. Additionally,

urban women tend to have comparatively better access to education, legal services, and civil society organizations than their rural counterparts. These structural advantages create opportunities for programs aimed at enhancing women's resilience and reducing their vulnerability to IPV (Jayasundere, 2016). However, such efforts must be contextually adapted to confront persistent challenges, including patriarchal norms, economic dependency, and social stigma factors that continue to normalize and sustain domestic violence (Fonseka, 2017).

This desk review paper explores the role of social empowerment as a strategy to reduce and prevent IPV against women in urban Sri Lanka. Drawing on scholarly literature, policy documents, and international and local program models, the paper identifies best practices and key gaps in current approaches. Precisely, it examines how dimensions of empowerment economic independence, legal literacy, psychosocial support, and community mobilization contribute to strengthening women's capacity to resist, recover from, and ultimately prevent domestic violence.

The review is grounded in three core objectives:

1. To define and contextualize the concept of social empowerment within the socio-cultural and legal framework in urban Sri Lanka.
2. To assess the effectiveness of empowerment-based interventions in addressing Intimate partner violence.
3. To propose policy and practice recommendations with particular emphasis on enhancing the roles of social workers, civil society actors, and public institutions in facilitating women's empowerment.

A growing body of evidence suggest that socially empowered women are more likely to report abuse, seek legal and social support, and actively engage in peer networks that enhance resilience and recovery (UN Women, 2015). Community-based empowerment programs particularly those that engage men and boys have also been shown to challenge patriarchal norms and reduce tolerance toward IPV over time (Heise, 2011). Furthermore, integrated service delivery models that combine legal aid, economic training, counseling, and shelter support are particularly effective in supporting survivors' long-term recovery and reintegration (WHO, 2021).

The social empowerment approach closely aligns with core principles of social work, including respect for human dignity, the pursuit of social justice, and a commitment to systemic change (IFSW, 2014). In urban Sri Lankan context, social workers are positioned to serve as facilitators of empowerment through direct intervention such as counseling, advocacy, community education and referrals. They also play a critical role in engaging with marginalized women, such as migrant workers, single mothers, and women with disabilities who are excessively affected by IPV. They also play a critical role in engaging with marginalized women, such as migrant workers, single mothers, and women with disabilities who often face sensitive risk of IPV and reduce access to support services. Effectively addressing IPV in urban Sri Lanka requires a paradigm shift from reactive protection focused strategies to proactive empowerment-oriented approaches. The integration of empowerment strategies into public policy, institutional frameworks, and social service delivery can help Sri Lanka move toward a more equitable, just, and inclusive model of urban development.

2. Methodology

This study adopts s a qualitative desk review method, relying entirely on secondary data from peer-reviewed literature, reports, and policy documents published between 2015 and 2024.The goal was to explore how social empowerment addresses IPV among urban women in Sri Lanka. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and institutional sources (e.g., UN agencies, Sri Lankan NGOs). The literature search was conducted focusing on keywords such as “intimate partner violence,” “social empowerment,” and “social work interventions.” Inclusion criteria were Studies from Sri Lanka or similar South Asian contexts, focusing on empowerment-based IPV interventions with measurable outcomes and those limited to legal reforms without empowerment focus. A thematic analysis was used to organize findings into five domains, economic empowerment, legal literacy, community mobilization, trauma-informed care, and psychosocial support.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Domestic violence, particularly intimate partner violence (IPV), is a complex and deeply entrenched issue rooted in patriarchal norms, economic dependency, and institutional inadequacies. Globally, one in three women experiences physical or

sexual violence in her lifetime, most often by an intimate partner (WHO, 2021). In Sri Lanka, although reliable data remain scarce due to underreporting and stigma, IPV persists as a serious public health and human rights concern, especially in urban areas where social transitions, economic stress, and housing insecurity intersect to exacerbate women's vulnerability (Fonseka, 2017; Jayasundere, 2016).

3.1. Domestic Violence in the Urban Sri Lankan Context

Urban environments such as Colombo, Gampaha, and Kandy present a paradox, while women may enjoy improved access to education, employment, and services, they also face unique stressors overcrowding, economic insecurity, and social isolation which reinforce male dominance and intensify IPV risks (Samarasinghe & Soldatic, 2015). Cultural expectations emphasizing female obedience and family honor further discourage help-seeking and perpetuate silence (UNFPA, 2020). Although the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (PDVA) No. 34 of 2005 provides legal mechanisms for protection, challenges in implementation, lack of survivor awareness, and limited shelter and support services have hindered its effectiveness (Goonesekere & Amarasuriya, 2013).

3.2. Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory forms the conceptual backbone of this study, positioning women as active agents capable of transforming their own lives and social conditions. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied. She outlines three key components: resources (preconditions), agency (the process), and achievements (the outcomes).

Rowlands (1997) elaborates on this by identifying different forms of power relevant to empowerment:

01.Power within: developing confidence, awareness, and self-worth.

02. Power to: building individual capacity to make decisions and act.

03.Power with: promoting solidarity and collective action.

04.Power over: challenging and transforming oppressive structures.

In the Sri Lankan urban context, where gender norms and institutional failings intersect, these dimensions are vital in helping women navigate and resist IPV

3.3 Theoretical Approaches to Empowerment and Domestic Violence

Empowerment approach in social work practice is not merely about improving material conditions it also involves fostering critical consciousness, personal agency, and structural change (Gutierrez, 1990). Rather than framing survivors as victims, empowerment-based practice emphasizes strengths, resilience, and self-efficacy.

3.3.1. Restoring Power and Connection:

According to Herman (2005), empowerment extends beyond physical safety to include the restoration of dignity, self-worth, and community ties. Survivors of IPV often experience shame, trauma, and isolation. Empowerment-oriented interventions such as emotional support, legal advocacy, and safety planning help rebuild these damaged foundations and restore agency.

3.3.2. Economic Empowerment and Violence Prevention

Economic interventions, such as access to credit, vocational training, and entrepreneurship, enhance women's bargaining power and reduce dependency (Heise, 2011; UN Women, 2015). In Sri Lanka, NGOs have introduced microfinance and livelihood programs for IPV-affected women. However, research cautions that without gender-sensitization components, these efforts may provoke resistance or violence in patriarchal households (Fonseka, 2017). Thus, economic empowerment must be embedded within broader gender-transformative strategies.

3.3.3. Legal Empowerment and Rights Awareness

Legal literacy programs increase women's understanding of their rights and reduce the barriers to accessing justice. Initiatives led by organizations like Women in Need (WIN) focus on demystifying procedures and empowering survivors to seek legal redress (Jayasundere, 2016). Nonetheless, such programs must improve outreach to underserved populations, including migrant workers and women in informal settlements.

3.3.4 Psychosocial Support and Community Engagement

Psychosocial empowerment is another key component in addressing IPV. Survivors often face long-term trauma, anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. Counseling, peer support groups, and crisis intervention services provide emotional healing and help rebuild self-esteem. Organizations like Women in Need (WIN) in Sri Lanka offer trauma-informed support services, including helplines, legal counseling, and temporary shelter for survivors. Additionally, community-based interventions such as public awareness campaigns, community theater, and participatory workshops are increasingly used to shift social norms and promote non-violent masculinities (UNFPA, 2020).

4. Empowerment in Social Work Practice

Social workers are uniquely positioned to intervene through case management, advocacy, referrals, and policy influence. In urban Sri Lanka, they play a crucial role in helping marginalized survivors such as single mothers, migrant women, and women with disabilities navigate complex systems and access services

In social work, empowerment means working collaboratively with survivors, using a strengths-based approach that incorporates mutual respect, shared decision-making, and joint action. The empowerment approach encourages social workers to address challenges at multiple levels individuals, families, communities, and societal structures to ensure that survivors receive comprehensive support (Lee, 2001). Zimmerman (2000) emphasizes that empowerment is rooted in fostering self-efficacy, personal control, and coping strategies. Empowering survivors helps them gain the confidence to make informed decisions, manage their emotions, and proactively engage in their environments. Social workers play a crucial role in psychosocial empowerment by providing case management, linking survivors to services, and advocating for systemic change. Their ability to operate at the connection of individual, family, and community systems allows them to foster inclusive and sustainable change, particularly in urban neighborhoods affected by poverty, addiction, and crime.

4.1 Integrated Models of Empowerment and Best Practices

The literature also supports the effectiveness of integrated intervention models those combining economic support, legal assistance, psychosocial counseling, and community mobilization. For example, global programs like “SASA” (Start,

Awareness, Support, Action) in Uganda and Stepping Stones in South Asia have demonstrated positive outcomes in reducing IPV through community engagement and gender norm transformation (Heise, 2011). These models offer lessons for Sri Lanka, where empowerment initiatives remain fragmented and donor dependent. To move forward, Sri Lanka must invest in scalable, context-sensitive, and multi-sectoral frameworks for IPV prevention. This requires integrating empowerment into national gender policies, building capacity among social workers, and fostering partnerships with civil society.

5. Conclusion

The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (2005) laid a necessary legal foundation, but legal recourse alone cannot dismantle the socio-cultural structures that sustain IPV. This review illustrates that social empowerment is a transformative strategy capable of addressing IPV's root causes by enhancing women's autonomy, resilience, and access to rights and services.

Empowerment involves more than economic independence it is a multidimensional process encompassing legal knowledge, psychological healing, and social participation. Empowered women are more likely to recognize abuse, seek help, and contribute to social change. Social workers, civil society, and state institutions must collectively adopt empowerment-oriented approaches that prioritize survivor agency and systemic transformation.

Ultimately, shifting from a model of passive protection to one of active empowerment can lead to lasting change not only in individual lives but also in the broader mission for gender equity and inclusive urban development in Sri Lanka.

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