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Exploring the Voices NGOs on Domestic Violence Issues among Women in Kota Kinabalu

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence against women is a pervasive issue that affects individuals globally, transcending various religions, races, and regions. Such violence often results in severe physical injury, emotional distress, or, in the worst cases, loss of life. This study aims to investigate the perspectives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) regarding the determinants of domestic violence in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The study employed a qualitative study and descriptive research design. Semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling was conducted to gather insights from representatives of seven NGOs, including the Sabah Human Rights Centre, SAWO, Good Shepherd Services, Seri Murni Crisis Centre, SERATA, Pacos Trust, and Befrienders. Analysis of the responses revealed that various factors, including economic conditions, social dynamics, and administrative elements, influence domestic violence. One of the largest factors contributing to this field of study is cultural norms whereby men were seen to be the leader of the family institution as men always be the sole breadwinner in the family. The study advocates for a collaborative approach involving government, community, and family institutions to effectively address domestic violence and foster a safer environment for women.

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence, commonly referred to as intimate partner violence, represents a profound global crisis affecting individuals across diverse geographical, cultural, and economic contexts. According to Muhazir & Marzuki (2015), as cited in Muniandy et al. (2020), violence against women is characterised by various forms of victimisation that transcend societal boundaries. In Malaysia, this crisis is underscored by alarming statistics from the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), which reported a total of 30,228 cases of domestic violence from 2020 to September 2024 (Ova, 2024). The seriousness of this issue was further highlighted by the Deputy Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development, Datuk Seri Dr. Noraini, who

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noted that the number of domestic violence cases surged to 7,116 in 2024, compared to 5,507 cases in 2023. This troubling trend necessitates an exploration of the underlying determinants contributing to domestic violence in the region.

Research by Tavassoli et al. (2022) and Milne (2023) highlight both the global and local urgency of addressing violence against women. In response to this escalating crisis, various programmes have been introduced by government agencies, including the formation of the committee for addressing domestic violence (known as “Jawatankuasa Menangani Keganasan Rumah Tangga, JKRT”), the establishment and review of the Domestic Violence Act 1994 (Act 521), the Skwad Waja Programme Centres, the Telenita helpline, counselling services, temporary shelters, free legal advisory, and emotional and psychological support.

Despite the efforts undertaken by both the government and NGOs, incidents of domestic violence persist. An alarming example from 2025 includes a woman allegedly stabbed to death by her husband in an incident witnessed by their 12-year-old daughter. In another case, a husband threatened to distribute his wife's photos or videos online unless she complied with his demands. Furthermore, a wife reported being secretly monitored by her ex-husband through a hidden camera that he used to stalk her activities, while another case involved a man who refused to pay his wife's maintenance, accompanied by ongoing physical abuse from her ex-husband (Wala Abdul Muiz, 2025).

The impact of domestic violence extends beyond the individual victim. It creates significant harm, including physical injuries, mental abuse, and long-lasting trauma, while also eroding the fabric of family institutions and communities, thereby hindering progress toward gender equality. The lasting emotional and psychological damage inflicted by domestic violence can manifest as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse (Schouler Ocak & Brandl, 2022). If instances of violence or harassment are not taken seriously and addressed early, they can escalate dramatically, potentially leading to murder, fatal attacks, or other forms of lethal violence. Thus, addressing domestic violence is vital not only for protecting victims but also for fostering societal well-being and harmony. This study explores NGO perspectives to identify determinants of domestic violence in Kota Kinabalu, aiming to inform more effective prevention strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Determinants of Violence against Women

Economic factors are among the primary contributors to domestic violence, particularly financial strain and economic empowerment. Financial strain refers to the challenges individuals face in meeting their financial needs, whether through perceived economic hardship or actual financial difficulties (Ettman et al., 2023). Economic instability increases the risk of domestic violence, especially when it leads to emotional stress and alcohol misuse. Vora et al. (2020) found that income loss often contributes to higher alcohol consumption among spouses, creating unstable home environments. Ayob et al. (2020) also reported that individuals in lower socio-economic groups face greater risk of domestic violence due to financial stress and unequal household power dynamics. These studies suggest that economic hardship interacts with emotional distress, substance use, and control-related behaviour, forming a cycle that reinforces domestic violence. This shows the need for comprehensive approaches that address more than just financial issues.

Economic empowerment plays a critical role in reducing this risk. It involves giving individuals, especially women, the ability to earn income, access resources, and make financial decisions. This not only promotes independence but also shifts power relations within households (Asian Development Bank, 2023). Bulte and Lensink (2019) argue that gender imbalance rooted in economic structures is a major driver of violence against women. Although much of the evidence is global, similar trends have been observed in Sabah. Local NGOs have reported that economic hardship in rural and semi-urban areas is linked to increased domestic violence, highlighting the need for more localised research and targeted policy efforts. This is supported by Ahmad, Mohd Yusoff, and Hidir Baharudin (2022), who analysed how economic

empowerment initiatives and social protection policies in Malaysia played a role in mitigating domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study highlights that when women are economically supported and protected by institutional mechanisms, the likelihood of domestic abuse decreases in which affirming the relevance of structural economic interventions in the Sabah context.

Childhood exposure to violence, whether at home, school, or in the community, significantly increases the risk of future involvement in domestic violence (Fraga et al., 2022). Mannell et al. (2023) found that individuals who witness or experience violence during early development are more likely to replicate these behaviours later in life, either as victims or perpetrators. This supports the idea that violence is not just situational but socially learned and passed through generations. Patriarchal structures further reinforce these patterns. In societies where men hold authority and traditional gender norms are upheld, domestic violence becomes normalised (Sunitha, 2016). Children growing up in such settings may internalize violence as a legitimate expression of power. Boys may view aggression as acceptable, while girls may tolerate victimisation as part of life. Early marriages compound this issue by trapping young girls in unequal relationships where they lack the autonomy or resources to resist abuse. In Sabah, similar challenges exist, particularly in rural communities where cultural norms and limited awareness of gender-based violence allow these cycles to persist. Few local studies have explored how early exposure and patriarchal norms intersect, making this an important area for future research and community intervention.

Early marriage, defined as a union before the age of 18, presents significant risks to the health, education, and rights of women and girls (Raj et al., 2019). Ahmad et al. (2019) found that younger women who marry older men, particularly those with a three-to-four-year age gap and multiple children, are more likely to experience physical violence. These overlapping factors, including young marital age, unequal power relations, and the burden of caregiving responsibilities, increase the likelihood of abuse. In regions such as Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Assam, the high prevalence of early marriage is closely linked to traditional norms and structural inequalities that perpetuate gender-based violence. Legal measures such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) exist, but their impact remains limited due to persistent cultural attitudes and deeply rooted gender roles. Although these studies are based in India, similar trends are found in parts of Sabah, Malaysia. In some rural communities, early marriage is still practiced, often leading to limited education and reduced decision-making power among young women. These conditions create environments in which domestic violence can persist. Further research is needed to explore how cultural expectations in Sabah influence early marriage and the continuation of gender-based violence.

Media representations play a significant role in reinforcing traditional gender roles that support the persistence of domestic violence. Alkan and Tekmanli (2021) found that 15 percent of married women in Turkey aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical or sexual abuse by their spouse within the previous year. The study also found that women with lower levels of education were more likely to experience such violence, especially in relationships marked by unequal power dynamics. These findings suggest that media portrayals and educational disparities work together to shape societal expectations. When women are consistently depicted as caregivers and men as dominant leaders, these roles become normalised. This contributes to the acceptance of male control within intimate relationships and makes abusive behaviour more socially tolerated. Even when women hold professional or leadership positions, public narratives often continue to emphasise male superiority, which undermines progress toward gender equality. In Sabah, similar patterns can be observed through local television, advertisements, and cultural media content that reinforce conventional roles. These portrayals, combined with lower education rates among rural women, create environments where domestic violence may be overlooked or minimised. Promoting media literacy and encouraging gender-sensitive content could support efforts to shift public perceptions and reduce violence.

Education plays a critical role in reducing domestic violence by increasing awareness, promoting gender equality, and enhancing women's economic independence. Women with higher education levels are more

likely to recognise abuse, understand their rights, and seek help. Singh (2023, 2024) and Weitzman (2018) highlight that education reduces women's dependence on abusive partners and equips them to challenge harmful norms.

Despite existing legal frameworks, gaps remain in enforcement and access. Many survivors are unaware of their rights or hesitate to report due to fear, stigma, and complex legal processes. Community leaders, often lacking gender sensitivity training, may unintentionally hinder women's access to justice. In Kota Kinabalu, respondents noted the absence of local shelters and legal aid as key barriers. Without adequate support services, women face limited options for safety and recovery.

Economic empowerment further reduces the likelihood of violence. Singh (2024) reports that an increase in women's financial autonomy is linked to a decrease in domestic violence cases. Yet, many rural women remain economically dependent and under informed. Addressing these intersecting issues requires stronger legal outreach, public education campaigns, and better access to shelters and legal aid, especially in underserved areas like parts of Sabah.

2.2 Family System Theory

Family system theory explains domestic violence as part of a broader pattern of violence within the family, which may also include abuse among siblings or towards children. It suggests that power imbalances embedded in the family structure can create conditions where violence is more likely to occur, often hidden from public view. Children raised in such environments may learn and normalise aggressive behaviours, especially when external intervention is absent. These behaviours can persist into adulthood and resurface in their own relationships, perpetuating cycles of abuse.

Within this framework, early marriage is viewed not just as an isolated issue but as a product of systemic family dynamics. Young brides are especially vulnerable due to traditional family structures that reinforce unequal power relations and rigid gender roles. These patterns often leave young women without agency or support. According to Sunitha (2016), early marriage operates as a social practice that reflects and sustains broader cycles of family-based violence. Addressing domestic violence, therefore, requires examining how deeply rooted family norms and power hierarchies contribute to sustained harm across generations.

2.3 Conflict and Control Theory

Conflict and control theories suggest that power imbalances allow dominant groups to impose restrictions on those with less power. These restrictions often serve to protect the interests of powerful groups while reinforcing the inferior status of marginalised individuals, particularly women. Economic dependence becomes a key tool in maintaining control, as women with limited access to financial resources may feel unable to leave abusive relationships. In the context of Sabah, this situation is especially visible among women in rural communities, where access to employment, education, and support systems is limited. These social and economic factors interact in ways that make it difficult for women to break free from the cycle of violence, demonstrating how control, economic vulnerability, and societal expectations are deeply connected.

Based on the literature reviewed and theoretical perspectives outlined above, the study creates a conceptual framework outlining the primary determinants of domestic violence against women in Kota Kinabalu. These variables are divided into three categories: economic, social, and management issues. Table 1 summarises the conceptual framework used in this investigation.

Table 1. Determinants of Domestic Violence Against Women: Conceptual Framework

Determinants of Domestic Violence Against Women
Economic Factors

Economic empowerment & dependence
Financial strain

Social Factors

Childhood exposure to violence
Early marriage
Social norms & cultural beliefs
Education on domestic violence
Legal framework & enforcement

4. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the determinants of domestic violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, from the perspectives of NGOs. One-on-one interview, semi-structured interview questions were conducted with representatives from selected NGOs to collect in-depth and context-specific data. A cross-sectional approach was used, with data collected at a single point in time. The study engaged multiple organisations such as the Sabah Women's Action Resource Group (SAWO), Good Shepherd Services (GSS), Seri Murni Shelter, Society for Equality, Respect and Trust for All Sabah (SERATA), Sabah Human Rights Centre (SHRC), PACOS Trust, and Befrienders, which are all actively involved in addressing domestic violence.

3.2 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is individual NGO representatives working directly with domestic violence survivors. These participants were selected based on their involvement in frontline service provision, advocacy, or program management related to women's issues in Kota Kinabalu.

3.3 Sample Size

Nine informants participated in this study. This number was determined based on the guidance of Guest et al. (2006), who suggest that six to twelve interviews are often sufficient in qualitative studies where the participant group is relatively homogeneous. The selected informants were involved actively in tackling issues of women violence in Kota Kinabalu Sabah. Data saturation was reached by the ninth interview, as no new themes or significant variations were emerging.

3.4 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to select NGOs based in Kota Kinabalu that have direct involvement with domestic violence cases. Participants were chosen for their professional experience and diverse roles, including caseworkers, program officers, and legal advisors. This approach ensured a broad range of insights from different angles of NGO intervention and support.

3.5 Measurement

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool. This format allowed for open-ended responses and flexibility during the interview sessions, which enabled the exploration of sensitive issues while still guiding the conversation according to the research objectives. The questions were designed to uncover the causes, impacts, and challenges surrounding domestic violence against women.

3.6 Data Collection

Data gathering activity for the said research was executed with a keen interest towards those organizations (NGOs) present in Kota Kinabalu, which expressed its interest to look into determinants of domestic

violence among women within Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and had undertaken measures to sort out domestic violence incidents. Such a technique has been implemented in order that the researchers believe such organisations have distinctive insight and knowledge available with them. Informants' response would be benefited in providing valid input to the study. Interviews were conducted with a total of nine informants who were selected for their expertise and involvement in tackling domestic violence. Informants were initially contacted through phone calls and messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, to coordinate suitable times for the interviews. The interviews were carried out using two modalities: face-to-face interactions and online platforms, including Zoom and Google Meet, to accommodate varying preferences and logistical considerations.

Each session allowed for flexibility in the discussion while guaranteeing that essential themes related to the research topic were explored comprehensively. The interview protocol, including informed consent forms, was provided to the participants to ensure that their involvement was voluntary and based on informed decision-making. Verbal consent was obtained for the recording of interviews, which facilitated accurate transcription and subsequent thematic analysis of the data. Data collection was carried out after getting approval from UiTM research ethics committee. Interviews session takes around one hour for each informant.

This methodological framework aimed to generate rich qualitative data that would illuminate the complex factors contributing to domestic violence against women in the specific context of Kota Kinabalu. Through careful recruitment and data collection practices, the study sought to uphold the integrity of the research process while capturing the nuanced experiences of the informants involved. The compilation of interview questions is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview Questions

Informant's Profile	Can you tell us your age, occupation, race and name of the NGO
The NGO perspective on the determinants of domestic violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the perspective of NGOs, how do societal norms and cultural factors influence violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah? • How does childhood experience of domestic violence affect people's behaviour in repeating the same violence towards their children? • As NGO members, have you ever experienced handling cases of women abuse due to early marriage? • As one of the NGO members, what role do economic factors play in contributing to violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah? • How does economic empowerment affect violence against women in Kota Kinabalu? • How do NGOs in Kota Kinabalu perceive the impact of education, or lack thereof, on the occurrence of violence against women? • From the NGO standpoint, how does the legal framework and enforcement contribute to or mitigate violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah? • As part of your role in the NGO, what are the primary factors contributing to the rise in cases of violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah?

3.7 Data Analysis

The data analysis process commenced with transcription, followed by the application of conventional thematic analysis. This approach included achieving data saturation and employing translation methodologies to ensure clarity and depth of understanding.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis process commenced with transcription, followed by the application of conventional thematic analysis. This approach included achieving data saturation and employing translation methodologies to ensure clarity and depth of understanding.

4.1 Economic Determinants

During the interview sessions and data analysis, several economic factors contributing to domestic violence against women in Kota Kinabalu were identified. The main themes include financial strain, economic empowerment and dependence, and economic stress. These factors are closely linked and reflect broader structural issues related to income inequality, gendered power dynamics, and urban economic pressures. This aligns with the conflict and control theory, which explains how financial dependency and control are used as tools to maintain dominance in abusive relationships.

4.1.1 Financial Strain

Most informants described financial difficulty as a significant trigger for domestic violence. Living in an urban area like Kota Kinabalu, with high costs of living, contributes to stress within families and may escalate tensions that lead to abuse.

"Women in the financially strained situation may lack access to their own money or resources, which are the basic needs to leave the abusive partner and start a fresh." - I01

"... because we are talking about Kota Kinabalu its a city like an urban area. One of it from what we see is financial distress of financial stress. Due to as I've mention before due to like raising cost of living in the city ..things like that and then another one is unequal power dynamics in the relationship. But its I would say its interrelated, there are both of financial stress and also the power dynamics." - I04

This finding is related to control and conflict theory where women without financial power are exposed to women violence.

4.1.2 Economic Empowerment and Dependence

Informants emphasised that women without income or financial freedom are more vulnerable to abuse. Economic dependence on a partner reinforces unequal power relations, making it harder for women to escape abusive environments.

" as we know Kota Kinabalu is a city. So a lot of a dynamic in the family especially when the main provider is male does spouse the husband. A lot of the burden on a financial burden is on the husband so when the family is in this city setting where the husband will be responsible for the financial of the family it does again it will create the unequal dynamics in the family lah so I would say the economic empower does effect violence against women in Kota Kinabalu." - I04

"Economic dependence can create power imbalance in relationships or in marriages where the one who is economically dominant partner uses financial control as a form of abuse and limiting you know the other uh his or her other half uh access to money employment as well as other resources." - I01

This finding is related to family system theory where imbalance of power between man and women will become root cause of women violence in family institution.

4.1.3 Economic Stress

A recurring theme introduced by informants was economic stress. Participants shared that financial hardship often leads to emotional pressure, which can act as a trigger for domestic violence, even if not the sole cause.

"...economic stress lah because like especially we live in such a capitalistic society kan ...because all of us even if we are not say violenced lah we feel that stress especially kalau duit kan so like Clarinie say lah it's sort of trigger, bukan macam not the only factor or because it's a lot of things tapi you cannot deny that kalau kau tiada duit kau memang stress."

(...economic stress, because we live in such a capitalistic society, right? All of us even if we are not experiencing violence still feel that pressure, especially when it comes to money. So, as Clarinie mentioned, it can be a trigger; it's not the only factor since there are many others, but you can't deny that when you don't have money, you're definitely stressed.) – I03

In summary, financial instability not only increases tension in households but also limits women's ability to leave abusive situations, reinforcing a cycle of dependency and violence. These findings are consistent with the power and control dynamics observed in abusive relationships and are particularly relevant in urban environments like Kota Kinabalu.

4.2 Social Determinants

Childhood exposure to violence and early marriage also contribute to the prevalence of domestic violence among women.

4.2.1 Childhood Exposure to Violence

A recurring theme among informants was the impact of witnessing violence during childhood. Many respondents observed that children who grow up in abusive households are more likely to accept or replicate such behaviour in adulthood. This aligns with existing literature which asserts that early exposure to domestic violence is a predictor of either future victimisation or perpetration (Rodriguez & Venzor, 2022). Informants agreed that without intervention, this inter-generational transmission of violence can become deeply embedded in family structures.

"...so basically, for nurture, we learn from the behaviours of others so and it's also by a cycle of violence so by witnessing you know that you parents or like for example the father abusing the mother that can also basically it can it could be a cycle for the child..." - I01

"Children who see the domestic violence on their mother will not know that it is wrong when they grow up. It will be a chain reaction. The children will think that it is all right to abuse their future wives." - I02

This indicates that childhood exposure does not merely influence perception but also behaviour, as individuals who internalise violence often replicate it within their own families or relationships.

4.2.2 Early Marriage

Early marriage also emerged as a critical factor. Informants noted that girls married at a young age often lack the maturity, education, and autonomy to navigate marital conflicts, making them vulnerable to abuse. These relationships frequently stem from early pregnancies or cultural expectations and are exacerbated by economic hardship and power imbalances. Informants shared that in such unions, domestic violence is often tolerated or normalised due to limited support systems and dependency.

"Bagi pengalaman saya memang adalah dalam komuniti, dia berkahwin dalam belasan tahun begitulah dan bila dia mendapat dua tiga anak begitu dan mengalami masalah terutama masalah ekonomi istri yang jadi masalah ni lelaki apatu bertindak apabila mengambil alkohol begitu uh bertindak di luar jangka..."

(In my experience, yes, it does happen in the community. She got married in her teenage years, and after having two or three children, she began facing problems, especially financial ones. The issue is with the husband when he consumes alcohol, he tends to act unpredictably...) - I10

This suggests that early marriage, when combined with financial stress and lack of agency, traps young women in cycles of dependency and violence as reflected in family system theory. It also reinforces patriarchal norms that silence women and permit abusive behaviour.

4.2.3 Societal Norms and Cultural Beliefs

Most informants reported that urge in violence against women is a result of societal attitudes and victim-blaming ideas. The following are the responses provided by the participants:

"...men are always seems to be like all you need to listen to me I'm the breadwinner of the family I can do whatever you want because even I'm not really sure about KK tapi because SAWO works with women around Sabah so we don't really like segregate the town. If we talking about women in Sabah in general there are still a lot of communities yang masih patriarchal ba jadicakalau patriarchal punya ideology kan memang the man is I don't give a crap."

(...men always seem to have this attitude of 'you need to listen to me, I'm the breadwinner of the family, I can do whatever I want.' I'm not entirely sure about KK, but since SAWO works with women across Sabah, we don't really segregate by town. If we're talking about women in Sabah in general, there are still many communities that remain patriarchal and with that kind of patriarchal ideology, the man basically has the mindset of 'I don't give a crap.) – I03

"Cultural attitudes that tolerate and condone the violence against women so that also could lead to higher incidences of such violence and also victim blaming. Some cultural beliefs right, blame victims for the violence they experience can discourage, what do you call... women from reporting abuse or also seeking help." - I01

4.2.4 Education on Domestic Violence

Informants consistently agreed that education and awareness regarding domestic violence are still lacking, especially in schools and rural areas. Many women remain unaware of their rights, how to seek help, or recognize the signs of abusive relationships. These gaps in knowledge contribute to the cycle of abuse and hinder women from accessing support. One informant shared that women, especially in rural Sabah, often do not understand their rights and value as individuals, which delays their ability to seek help.

"Bagi saya, di sekolah sekarang, di sekolah-sekolah masih kurang itu kesedaran tentang keganasan terhadap wanita, especially bagi membagikan kesedaran tentang wanita punya worth and dorang punya hak, and then eh dorang punya akses untuk mendapatkan bantuan begitu, dan itulah kami rasa masih memang kurang lagi kesedaran terutamanya di KK area and then di rural area, di sekolah- sekolah sana memang masih banyak wanita yang tidak tahu dorang punya hak begitu."

(For me, in schools nowadays, there is still a lack of awareness about violence against women, especially in terms of raising awareness about women's worth and their rights, as well as their access to getting help. That's why we feel that awareness is still very low, especially in the Kota Kinabalu area, and even more so in rural areas, where there are still many women who do not know their rights.) – I02

"Awareness is very important for women. If they are educated, they know how to find help, they know what is right and wrong." - I12

Several informants noted that education from a young age, including through school programs or NGO-led initiatives, is essential for breaking the cycle of violence. Education empowers women to understand their rights, recognise abusive dynamics early, and seek help confidently. A few informants also mentioned that educational efforts through community workshops or training sessions, especially those focused on gender equality, can raise awareness at the grassroots level.

4.3.5 Legal Framework and Enforcement

Another recurring issue highlighted by informants is the weakness in legal implementation and enforcement mechanisms. Despite the existence of laws and policies that aim to protect women, many respondents expressed frustration over delays and lack of seriousness by enforcement bodies in handling domestic violence cases. Respondents emphasised that poor enforcement, insufficient shelters, and a lack of coordinated support services hinder victims' access to justice.

"We do see that because we do have cases we receive from OACC or maybe from the police itself or from Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM)(Department of Social Welfare (DSW)), we can say that it still can be improve because we do hear cases where when the victims go to the police sometimes the police tends to ..maybe you go to hospital first or if they instead of they like you know assisting the victims or the survivors properly." - I04

Informants also pointed out that enforcement agencies often dismiss domestic violence as a private family matter. Some expressed concern over community leaders' lack of awareness of women's rights, particularly in male-dominated leadership structures, which further obstruct effective support for survivors. Informants agreed that without strong enforcement and better public awareness, legal protection remains inadequate for many victims.

4.3 Management Determinants

Conducting a qualitative study revealed new determinants of domestic violence against women. Informants indicated that the availability of support systems and biases in police responses are significant contributing factors to the prevalence of domestic violence.

4.3.1 Availability of Support Systems

Informants in Kota Kinabalu reported that a lack of support services significantly hinders victims of domestic violence from seeking help. Many women are unaware of available shelters, legal aid, or counselling options, especially in rural or underserved communities. Informants noted that shelters are insufficient, and legal or psychological support is not easily accessible. This scarcity contributes to the continued prevalence of violence, as victims are left with few safe alternatives.

"Lack of support services like what I mentioned earlier about shelters you know insufficient shelters as well as counselling services and legal aid." - I01

According to the informants, many women do not report abuse due to fear, stigma, or the belief that nothing will change. The lack of facilities such as shelters and trained professionals to handle trauma and recovery further discourages women from seeking help. This under reporting makes it difficult to track the true scale of the problem and weakens the effectiveness of response mechanisms

4.3.2 Bias in Police Response

Informants also highlighted how law enforcement bias undermines the handling of domestic violence cases. Many victims are reluctant to report incidents, especially when they encounter male officers who lack of training or sensitivity in dealing with gender-based violence. Informants expressed concern that domestic violence is still seen by some authorities as a private family issue rather than a crime.

"The legal framework and enforcement structures exist... but there is room for improvement... sometimes police do not assist victims properly, treating the issues as family problems instead." -I04

Some informants pointed out that specialised facilities like the Crisis Management Facility (CMF) are more effective, as their officers are trained and work alongside social workers, counsellors, and legal advisors. However, such specialised services are limited, and many women have no access to these resources. This shows a gap in enforcement practices and a need for better training and more women officers to handle such sensitive cases appropriately. Table 3 below summarises themes and subthemes regarding the determinants of domestic violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

Table 1 has shown the conceptual framework established from the literature review. Table 3 below summarises the empirical themes and subthemes that emerged from qualitative interviews with NGO representatives. This table shows how the actual findings from the field correspond with the theoretical components described earlier, emphasising the congruence between the study's conceptual framework and the data acquired. Table 3 below summarises themes and subthemes regarding the determinants of domestic violence against women in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes for the Determinants of Domestic Violence against Women

Determinants of Domestic Violence Against Women
Economic Factors
Economic empowerment & dependence
Financial strain
Social Factors
Childhood exposure to violence
Early marriage
Social norms & cultural beliefs
Education on domestic violence
Legal framework & enforcement

5. CONCLUSION

This research offers insight into domestic violence in Kota Kinabalu through the perspectives of local NGOs. The findings align with the research objective by highlighting economic, social, and management factors that contribute to domestic abuse. These factors impact not only victims' well-being but also family and community stability. The study underscores the need for collaborative action. NGOs and government agencies should strengthen awareness programs, improve access to shelters and counselling, strengthen policy and ensure more effective legal enforcement. Community involvement and trained police response are also essential in protecting victims and preventing further abuse.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that this study was conducted without any personal, commercial, or financial interests that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. This research was conducted without any commercial or financial support that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Audrey Vianney Alexander conducted the fieldwork and prepared the literature review as well as findings. Angel Priscilla Kining was also involved in the fieldwork and wrote the research methodology and findings. Jennifah binti Nordin acted as an advisor and contributed to writing and refining the entire article.

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