

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of women's unemployment and income disparities on intimate partner violence

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ABSTRACT

The study critically investigated the connection between Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and women's economic status. The study was qualitative and used semi-structured interviews to collect data. The feminist economic theory guided the researcher throughout the study. The study revealed that reducing wage disparities and enhancing women's access to steady work are essential to reducing intimate partner violence. The study recommends prioritization of the economic opportunities for the victims, policy interventions that support financial literacy, job opportunities, and economic empowerment initiatives that may potentially lower intimate partner violence rates. This paper promotes a multifaceted strategy to combat gender-based violence by addressing the structural economic disparities that underlie intimate partner violence and incorporating economic reforms into more comprehensive intimate partner violence prevention tactics.

Keywords: intimate partner violence; victim, women; unemployment; income disparities; impact

1. Introduction and background

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a widespread public health crisis that afflicts women of all socio-economic backgrounds, and economic dependence is often a key barrier to exiting abusive relationships; of the numerous structural mechanisms that affect IPV, women's unemployment and income inequality are significant in understanding women's susceptibility to violence ^[1]. Another issue is financial dependence; when women feel that they financially depend on their abuser, it is even harder to leave, as such, their abuser will leverage on that and continue to abuse them, knowing they have limited options ^[2]. Previous research has shown that economic insecurity increases vulnerability to IPV as abusers can more easily use economic abuse (including economic coercion and withholding financial resources) to exert control over their partners ^[3,4]. These all contribute to the systemic economic oppression of women, as the gender pay gap, occupational segregation, and limited employment opportunities reinforce one another. Intimate partner violence constitutes one of the most pressing gender-based human rights violations, with far-reaching physical, psychological, and socio-economic effects ^[5]. Globally, almost one in every three women will face intimate partner violence at some stage in their lives, categorizing both a significant public health concern and a violation of social justice ^[1]. Cultural norms, childhood exposures to violence, and psychosocial triggers are some of the risk factors that

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may increase the generational risk of IPV ^[5]. However, economic vulnerability is becoming recognized as a principal risk factor ^[6]. Survivors are often attached to their abuser financially, leaving them with a barrier that keeps them locked into cycles of violence ^[2].

1.1. How economic volatility influences IPV

Economic insecurity of unemployment or income disparities is a significant factor in IPV rates; thus, empirical studies similarly find that economic distress limits women's autonomy, exposing them to coercive control and physical violence ^[3]. Unemployment or being a lower earner than their male partner poses more significant risks of financial abuse to women, which can take the form of controlled access to money, forced debt, and even sabotaging their employment ^[7]. To make matters worse, the wage disparity based on gender adds to this problem since women, on average, are still earning less than men performing similar tasks. This variance limits financial independence and, over time, increases dependence on the partner for economic security ^[8]. Furthermore, unemployment is a significant predictor of IPV risk; research shows that women with low economic resources often stay in abusive relationships where they would have left ^[9]. Meanwhile, financial strain stemming from male unemployment has been associated with increasing rates of IPV perpetration, as unemployment threatens a male's conventional male gender role and motivates aggression within the household ^[10].

Differences between partners' income also contribute to power imbalances in their relationships, fueling patriarchal systems that foster IPV. Relative resource theory states that the more significant the difference between a man's earnings and his female partner's earnings, the more likely they are to use financial dominance to control them ^[11]. By contrast, the backlash hypothesis posits that when women out-earn male partners, some men react with aggression as a way to reassert control, which drives higher rates of IPV in relationships where traditional gender norms are threatened^[12].

An effective response requires an integrated approach to IPV with economic empowerment, legal protections, and social support services. Programs to promote the financial independence of women, including those for employment, vocational training, and microfinance opportunities, have been shown to significantly reduce the risk of IPV by reducing the economic control mechanisms abusers use ^[13]. In addition, policy measures addressing the gender pay gap and women's access to stable employment are needed to help create financial resilience and break cycles of abuse ^[4]. These findings highlight how IPV interacts with economic status, an issue entrenched in systemic gender inequities that limit financial independence and perpetuate power disparity within intimate partnerships ^[5]. Noting that unemployment, income disparities, and economic dependence are significant factors for IPV, economic interventions are the centerpiece of primary prevention efforts ^[8]. Likewise, Haan ^[14] claims that increasing the economic power of women will be a critical component in reducing rates of IPV and preventing financial insecurity from trapping survivors in their abusive situations. This study explored the intersection between IPV and economic structures, building on how policies that mitigate gendered labor market inequalities can help improve long-run financial autonomy among women ^[15].

1.2. Problem statement

Intimate Partner Violence continues to be a widespread global issue, with economic inequalities, particularly women's unemployment and income disparities, playing a significant role in exacerbating the crisis. Financial dependency is widely recognized as a key factor that heightens women's vulnerability to IPV, as economic constraints often prevent them from leaving abusive relationships or seeking legal recourse ^[6]. Despite considerable research into IPV, a gap still exists in the assessment and interpretation of women's economic conditions, specifically employment rates versus wages, and how it relates to their chances of facing violence.

Great attention has been paid to the relationship between economic inequality and IPV. However, there is still controversy about whether unemployment and income differentials increase the likelihood of violence victimization^[9]. Some scholars contend that being economically dependent on male partners increases the risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) due to existing power differentials that make such violence easier to inflict^[16]. The prevalence of IPV in Sub-Saharan Africa is high, where women experience either physical or sexual violence^[5]. About 45.6 percent of women in these countries have experienced one form of IPV in their lifetime^[17]. A survey conducted in Malawi found that 42 percent of women in the country had experienced at least one form of IPV^[18]. In Ethiopia, close to a third of the female population had also experienced one form of IPV within 12 months^[19]. Most women who experienced IPV in Sub-Saharan countries lived in poverty^[5].

South Africa is counted among the countries with a high rate of intimate partner violence^[20]. It is reported that 20 to 50 percent of women in South Africa experienced an intimate partner relationship at some point^[21]. Moreover, Statistics South Africa's report on crimes against women, which was released in February 2022, stated that one in five women had experienced physical violence by her intimate partner^[22]. In 2015, South Africa's femicide rate was nearly four times that of the global figure, while a woman was killed every four hours in South Africa in 2016 by an intimate partner^[1, 23].

Others argue that economic independence cannot be viewed as a singular solution since some women with increased income violently retaliate against their male partners who feel a challenge to their authority^[24]. These opposing views regarding women's unemployment, wage gaps, and IPV require a deep understanding of further research. Furthermore, while a significant proportion of the studies concerning gender differences in the labor market highlight the negative aspects that women suffer from, very few have studied these aspects from an analytical perspective of violence^[25]. Many policy initiatives either emphasize economic empowerment or IPV prevention in isolation, neglecting the intersection between financial vulnerability and abuse^[26]. This gap in the literature emphasizes the urgent need for further exploration of how women's employment status and income inequalities directly shape their experiences with IPV.

1.3. Aims of the study

The researcher in this study hoped to accomplish the following goal: To gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of women's unemployment and income disparities on intimate partner violence.

1.4. Objectives of the study

- To explore the impact of women's unemployment and income disparities on intimate partner violence.
- To explore and describe the experiences of unemployed women regarding intimate partner violence.

1.5. Theoretical framework

The researcher in this study utilised feminist economic theory (FET). The feminist economic theory provided a strong theoretical foundation for analyzing the impact of women's unemployment and income disparities on gender-based violence and intimate partner violence. This theory critically examined how structural inequalities within economic and political systems disproportionately disadvantage women, thereby reinforcing gendered power imbalances that contribute to violence^[27]. It highlights the intersections of gender, class, and economic dependency, arguing that women's economic marginalization is not simply a result of individual choices but is shaped by broader patriarchal and neoliberal economic structures^[28].

The theory further views IPV as part of patriarchal social structures and intentional behavior patterns that establish and maintain power and control over current or ex-intimate partners^[29,30]. Moreover, major institutions, structures, ideologies, and governments are seen to be promoting violence against women. This theory believes that violence is not a natural expression of biological traits but is socially constructed and

culturally legitimate ^[29, 31]. Women are socially, politically, and economically excluded; therefore, they are unable to make decisions on issues that affect them. This creates a dependency of women on men and makes them vulnerable to IPV.

This theory assisted the researcher in understanding gender and power inequality as the main root of intimate partner violence, and gender roles that dictate how men and women should behave in intimate relationships have disempowered women while subjecting them to violence ^[32]. The theory assisted the researcher in gaining insight into how gendered inequalities of power in the economy contribute to vulnerability to IPV from feminist economic theory. FET challenges the assumptions of economics by showing how the undervaluation of women's work and economic dependence heighten the risk of IPV. The theory was employed in investigating how unemployment lowers the bargaining power of women and increases their vulnerability to control and violence in relationships.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Study setting and population

The study was conducted in Alexandra township in Gauteng province of South Africa. The researcher chose this site because it is an informal settlement that lacks proper social welfare services, and there have been a high number of cases of IPV in mainstream media. Moreover, it has a high rate of unemployment and intimate partner violence, where women are the victims, and it has a high intake of intimate partner violence cases. The township consists of informal and formal settlements. Poverty and other social ills torment the majority of community members because most of the members migrated to the area looking for economic opportunities.

In this study, the population consisted of women who were victims of intimate violence and who were recipients or had previously received services at Agisanag Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT). The research study focused on women who were victims of intimate partner violence at ADAPT, which is at Alexandra police station, Brown House, and Oliver Tambo building. ADAPT is one of the most prominent organisations in Alexandra that deals with gender-based violence. Many cases of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence are reported and referred to the organization, including cases that are opened at the police station.

As Punch ^[33] rightly point out, "You cannot study everyone, everywhere, doing everything"; a sample has to be drawn. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is the best strategy to obtain "information-rich" cases from which one can learn a great deal about the issues central to the purpose of the study, providing in-depth insight into the topic being investigated ^[34,35,36]. The following Inclusion and exclusion criteria were employed to draw a sample in line with the purpose of the study.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

- Participants consisted of women who had experienced intimate partner violence.
- Participants were residents of Alexandra for accessibility reasons.
- Participants were between 18 years and 60 years of age.
- Participants consisted of recipients of services and those who previously received services at ADAPT.
- Participants understand English and one or more South African languages.

The study applied the following exclusion criteria:

- Women who experienced other forms of domestic violence and were not residing in the Alexandra informal settlement.
- IPV victims who were not willing to sign a consent form.
- Participants who did not understand English or one of the South African languages.

Especially where human subjects are involved, obtaining ethical clearance and permission to conduct a research project is essential and non-negotiable ^[37]. Prior to embarking on this research journey, the researcher sought ethical clearance and permission from the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Social Work at Unisa (Ethical Clearance Number: DR&EC_2023/10/27/90160355/002) to conduct this study. In addition, she formally applied for permission to conduct the study among the victims of IPV in the ADAPT. This was requested from the national ADPAT, and once it had been granted, she requested permission from the respective Alexandra ADAPT office through the manager.

2.3. Research approach and design

A qualitative study was undertaken using a Phenomenology research design. Phenomenology was used to describe the ordinary meaning of the experiences of victims of IPV regarding the impact of unemployment^[34]. The study population in this research was the women victims of IPV. Purposive sampling in this research was a method of choice, and it allowed the researcher to use his judgment to select participants as guided by the inclusion criteria above. The population consists of eleven abused women who met the criteria of inclusion.

The participants were recruited from ADAPT after permission was granted by the organisation authorities. The researcher compiled a research information sheet that included benefits, risks, and requests for participants to form part of the study. The sheet also had the researcher's contact details and was given to counselors at ADAPT. Interested participants had to use the “please call me service.” Which is free to the researcher. The researcher had to call them for further arrangements, which included going through the participant information sheet and consent form. Then, interviews were conducted in the ADAPT boardroom and community multi-purpose centre, which was convenient for other participants. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes per participant. The researcher used a self-developed interview schedule; the interview was used to collect data through face-to-face semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions to get information.

2.4. Data analysis

The researcher employed the six-phase outline of Braun and Clarke ^[38] to analyse the collected data thematically. This entailed immersing himself in the data generated; developing codes for topical segments of data and coding them; turning codes into themes and grouping together the data belonging to a specific theme; scrutinising the data grouped under each theme for any mismatches; consolidating the theme names, ensuring that they were clear, descriptive and self-explanatory; and then commencing with reporting the research findings under the established themes.

3. Research findings

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Participants	Age	Marital status	Employment status	Average earnings per month
Participant 1	44	Single	Unemployed	R900.00 social grant

Participant 2	36	Married	Employed	R2450.00 & social grant
Participant 3	52	Married	Employed	R10000.00
Participant 4	45	Married, in a process of divorce	Unemployed	R2000.00 from maintenance
Participant 5	47	Married	Employed	R2500.00
Participant 6	24	Single	Unemployed	None
Participant 7	43	Married	Unemployed but sells chickens seasonally	R1500.00 social grant
Participant 8	20	Single	Unemployed	None
Participant 9	59	Divorced	She was employed during the marriage but is currently self-employed	R15000.00
Participant 10	59	Divorced	Unemployed but currently volunteering	R2500.00
Participant 11	39	Single/cohabiting	Employed	R1400.00

The researcher conducted interviews with 11 participants, excluding two pilot interviews. Before the actual study, the researcher conducted pilot testing to check the appropriateness of the research instrument, and adjustments were made before the actual study. All the participants were females, ranging from 20 to 59. In this study, a few participants were employed. Most of them were earning stipends of R2500.00. Only two participants reported earning R10,000.00 or more. Participants reported selling products to supplement their income. Five participants reported being unemployed. One participant amongst the unemployed has a business selling chickens, which operates during certain seasons. Three unemployed participants reported receiving a children's social grant (CSG), social relief of distress (SRD), and one on maintenance of R2000.00 for two children.

Some studies have revealed that intimate partner violence against women is higher in families with low income and where the male partner is unemployed or earns a very low salary ^[9]. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ^[39], IPV starts as early as adolescence and continues throughout the developmental stages. This confirms that IPV does not respect age; every woman of any age group is likely to experience IPV. Studies show that approximately 16 million women who reported having experienced IPV started experiencing it before the age of 18 ^[40]. It is not uncommon for one of the participants to start experiencing IPV from her partner during her teenage years.

Furthermore, amongst the participants who reported to be employed, one works as an auxiliary social worker, one is a volunteer at ADAPT as a counselor, one is running a business, one volunteers at Public Safety as a GBV brigader, and one does product promotion. Almost all the participants in this research are earning below the average. Regarding the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997, the monthly minimum wage in South Africa is R3,261.08. The stipends and social grants that participants survive on are too few to cater to their children's basic needs.

Table 2. Table of themes and subthemes.

Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Economic Dependence and Financial Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Financial Dependence on Partners • Perceived Security in Financial Dependence • Limited Access to Money and Economic Decision-Making

Theme 2: Power Dynamics and Control in Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Provision as a Tool for Control • Restriction of Financial Freedom
Theme 3: Psychological and Social Impact of Economic Dependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Manipulation Linked to Financial Dependence • Loss of Financial Agency and Self-Sufficiency

Theme 1: Economic Dependence and Financial Control

Subtheme 1.1: Full Financial Dependence on Partners

Economic dependence emerged as a dominant theme, with multiple participants reporting complete financial reliance on their partners. The views of participants are captured through the excerpts below:

Participant 4: “My husband, I depend a lot on him as I am a volunteer and earning a stipend.”

Participant 5: “As I was not employed, I depended fully on him, he was the one providing.”

Participant 8 *what assisted me a lot is the social grant for children , unfortunately I am unemployed and it is too little, mmm, you know my husband is the one working*

These accounts are consistent with empirical studies demonstrating that women’s unemployment strongly predicts IPV ^[9]. According to Vyas & Watts ^[3], unemployed women face significant barriers to leaving abusive relationships due to financial constraints, a lack of alternative housing, and minimal access to support systems. Lund & Smørðal ^[4] further argue that economic dependency increases economic entrapment, where women remain in abusive relationships despite their desire to leave, primarily because they lack the financial means to sustain themselves independently. Meyer, Hardt, Brambilla, and Sabrina ^[41] believe that the financial dependency of women on their partners increases their likelihood of being victimized by their male partners. Participants' statements highlight a significant issue of economic dependency in intimate partner relationships, where one partner relies heavily on the other for financial support. This dependence can lead to economic abuse, a form of intimate partner violence (IPV) where the abuser controls the victim's access to financial resources, thereby limiting their autonomy and ability to leave the abusive relationship ^[41].

Subtheme 1.2: Perceived Security in Financial Dependence

Initially, some women perceived their financial dependence as a form of security, believing that their partners' economic provision was an assurance of stability.

Participant 5: “*At first, it seemed like things were okay. Moreover, I remember there was a time when I was told that I should not worry as he was there. And being the provider, he will ensure he takes care of the family.*”

Notably, women in financially dependent relationships often conform to traditional gender norms in exchange for perceived protection, only to later find that this dependence limits their agency and mobility. Similarly, Blumberg ^[42] contends that financial dependency creates an illusion of security but ultimately reinforces gendered power asymmetries, leading to heightened vulnerability to IPV. Economic abuse includes behaviors that control a survivor's ability to acquire, use, and maintain resources, resulting in economic dependence and limiting their potential for self-sufficiency ^[43, 44]. Financial dependence is a significant risk factor for IPV. Research indicates that financial strain, unemployment, and living in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods can impact rates and severity of intimate partner violence ^[41].

Subtheme 1.3: Limited Access to Money and Economic Decision-Making

Several participants noted that, despite their partners providing for their basic needs, they lacked direct access to cash, reinforcing economic subjugation.

Participant 11: *“Okay, he was working, and uh, he was not kind of giving me hard cash, but he would buy everything in the house. It wasn’t like we struggled, or we were in short of this, in short of that, we had everything but hard cash, no, I never got it.”*

Participant 9: *“I depend on him, mama, but he does not do as he should as a man”.*

Participant 7: *“The only thing I can say I get is maybe R200,00 or R300,00, that’s it. The rest I will see myself”.*

This aligns with Postmus et al.,^[7] who describe economic abuse as a central form of IPV, where an abuser denies access to financial resources to limit a woman's autonomy. Cash access restricts women’s ability to seek help, escape, or make independent financial decisions^[45]. This is further corroborated by Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, and Greeson^[46], who found that economic abuse, including withholding money and controlling finances, is strongly correlated with psychological distress and prolonged IPV victimization. Economic abuse is a legally recognized form of domestic abuse, and it involves the control of money, finances, and other things that money can buy^[47]. This type of abuse is designed to create economic instability and/or make one partner economically dependent, which limits their freedom. Financial abuse occurs in 99% of domestic violence cases^[48]. It is a common tactic used by abusers to gain power and control in a relationship. These findings underscore the importance of addressing economic factors in interventions aimed at preventing and responding to intimate partner violence.

Theme 2: Power Dynamics and Control in Relationships

Subtheme 2.1: Financial Provision as a Tool for Control

Participants’ experiences indicate that financial dependence often evolves into economic control, restricting women's choices and reinforcing coercive power in relationships.

Participant 02: *“We had everything but hard cash, no, I never got it.”*

Because when I leave, he said nicely to me, when you walk out of the door, whatever you are taking with you, whether a dog or whatever cat, it’s your responsibility; I’m not going to do anything going forward for anybody anymore” (participant 6)

“I am not supposed to have visitors, I’m not supposed to visit others” (participant 3).

Research suggests that abusers deliberately limit women’s financial agency as a form of control^[49]. Bonomi et al,^[12] highlight that financial control mechanisms such as restricting access to money or requiring permission for spending are forms of coercive financial violence designed to increase dependency and limit autonomy. Financial dependency is viewed as the cause of IPV in women by some researchers and is mainly caused by unemployment^[50]. Some researchers found that low income levels contribute to the high victimization of their female partners^[51]. A study conducted by Lloyd found that women who had experienced intimate partner violence had lower personal income than those who had partners^[51]. Moreover, women who had experienced severe violence at the hands of their intimate partners, including physical abuse and rape, had the lowest incomes^[49]. Lack of financial support is one main reason why women stay in abusive relationships. Women are reluctant to leave their abusive intimate partners as they are concerned about how they are going to take care of their needs and those of their children^[52]. The participant, however, decided to leave the marriage under the circumstances, and this broke the status quo surrounding IPV and dependency.

Subtheme 2.2: Restriction of Financial Freedom

Women’s limited financial independence created a system of implicit control, where economic reliance made it difficult for them to assert their own choices.

Participant 5: *“And being the provider, he will ensure he takes care of the family.”*

“Yoh, I think the man, I don’t know what was happening with him because he never wanted me to be with people, that’s number one. If you visited me, he would have a problem after you have left. If I have visited you, I was still going to have a problem” (Participant 12).

This aligns with Anderberg et al. ^[10] who found that financial provision is often leveraged to enforce submission, where women feel indebted to their partners. The lack of financial alternatives reduces their bargaining power, trapping them in exploitative relationships ^[8]. Withholding financial support could be seen as a form of control by the partner. Since he was fully aware of her financial circumstances and that she could not sustain herself, withholding financial support could have been a way to make her return to him. This could be explained by situational couple violence in that divorcing couples’ level of stress may be evoked, which may result in violence ^[53]. Additionally, if one partner desires that the other partner stay, they may attempt to gain control over the partner whilst disregarding consequences associated with the violent act ^[53]. The participant’s husband, in this case, used withholding of financial support to gain control over her.

Theme 3: Psychological and Social Impact of Economic Dependence

According to research, IPV may weaken women's mental health ^[54]. Emotional health outcomes of IPV include low self-esteem, feelings of guilt or shame, and post-traumatic stress ^[55]. Participants in this study reported psychological and emotional effects such as stress, depression, loss of trust in men, low self-esteem, and substance abuse. Participants in this research explained how their experience of abuse had caused them psychological or emotional problems.

Subtheme 3.1: Emotional Manipulation Linked to Financial Dependence

Economic dependence fosters a form of psychological coercion wherein financial provision becomes a tool of control and manipulation. In abusive relationships, financial support is often weaponized to engender compliance and tolerance of mistreatment. Participants' narratives illustrate how economic dependence translates into emotional manipulation, reinforcing power imbalances. For instance,

Participant 5 said, *“And being the provider, he will make sure he takes care of the family,” emphasizing the provider archetypal role usually underpinning male hegemony in a home.*

Likewise, Participant 09 shared with us the following moving testimony: *“Sometimes he will abuse me, and when I am angry, he will come with many groceries; sometimes he will even remind me that he takes care of me and the children with money and no one will support his children.”*

This evidence underlines that financial support is not merely a means of sustenance but a tool of control compelling the victims to persist in residing within abusive environments due to insufficiency of substitute options.

Jewkes, Flood, and Lang ^[6] contend that economic dependence creates a state of entrapment in emotion, where victims are psychologically dependent on their offender, hence constraining their perceived autonomy. The learned helplessness phenomenon is most applicable here, where long-term economic dependence internalizes the perception that one cannot change one's situation ^[8]. Additionally, Yoshihama, Yunomae, Tsuge, Ikeda, and Masai ^[56] highlight that economic dependence creates internalized gratitude, ironically tying victims to perpetrators. This is underpinned by patriarchal institutions linking male economic support with domination, forcing women to silence their grievances at the expense of peace within the household. Institutionalization of economic coercion restricts resistance since victims can internalize the sense of owing someone and tolerate IPV.

Financial control thus seems to be a means by which abusers control not only physical and material conditions but also affective responses. Alternating between transactions of financial provision and abuse, the abusers establish a cycle of dependency that erodes the victim's autonomy and self-worth. The cyclical pattern of abuse, punctuated by material appeasement, makes it hard to leave because the victim is constantly reminded of her economic dependency. This aligns with the general economic abuse literature that specifies financial control as a leading cause of extended IPV experiences ^[7].

Subtheme 3.2: Loss of Financial Agency and Self-Sufficiency

Notably, many times, victims lose their decision-making voice and power in the relationships because they do not have financial dependence regarding the direction of relationships or other important things within the relationship. For instance,

Participant 11 explicitly stated, *"having no hard cash or money is challenge sometimes in a relationship, sometimes you cannot talk even if you want to suggest something . So it is hard to have an opinion in the relationship; all that the man says goes."*

The above assertions by participants clearly show the relationship between financial and personal agency. Moreover, it indicates that the partner with dominant finance generally dictates terms within the relationship and one with less, which in most cases is women find it difficult to contest the decisions.

This statement highlights the direct correlation between financial access and personal agency. Without economic resources, the ability to voice concerns or contest decisions within the relationship is curtailed, reinforcing a hierarchy where the financially dominant partner dictates the terms of engagement.

Similarly, Participant 6 illustrated the broader consequences of financial dependence on self-worth and emotional security:

"Mmm you know sometimes you see things but what can I say? You can even see the messages on the phone or sometimes hear phone calls and cheating happening. I mean, 'cos I am not working and I want to avoid fights and being told that I do not appreciate since I am unemployed. So, yah, it is tough."

This narrative illustrates that economic vulnerability puts victims in a position of quiet tolerance, where an action of speaking out about cheating or abuse is most likely to exacerbate their vulnerable situation. This supports resource deprivation theory ^[57], which suggests that economic empowerment narrows women's scope to leave abusive relationships because they have no realistic alternatives. This is reinforced by the general literature, which supports these results by illustrating that economic dependency dramatically heightens women's vulnerability to IPV. Vyas and Watts ^[3] also discovered that economic independence is an important protective factor because women having stable incomes are better able to exit violent relationships and gain access to legal or social support systems. Economic disadvantage constrains mobility, lessening exposure to shelter, legal assistance, and social services essential for independence ^[46]. Additionally, economic dependence constrains means of escape and lowers self-efficacy, sustaining psychological aspects of entrapment.

An important feature of economic disempowerment is that it exists across generations. Women who do not generate incomes themselves will fail to ensure their children's economic well-being and, as a result, cause perpetuation and susceptibility to cycles ^[58]. The economic agency goes far beyond immediate exposure to IPV in shaping long-term socioeconomic conditions and perpetuating deep-rooted, systematic gender inequalities. Therefore, economic dependence should be addressed through focused economic empowerment to limit IPV risk and promote long-term resilience. Economic dependence is an effective instrument of psychological and social control that enhances vulnerability to IPV through emotional manipulation and loss of self-regulation. Economic dependence on an abuser creates a coercive context in which victims are bullied

into accepting the abuse because they experience economic vulnerability. As evident in participants' narratives and documented in academic research, economic empowerment breaks down domination and decision-making agency and reinforces structural discrimination sustaining IPV. Redressing such a situation requires policy measures to enhance economic ability, economic independence, and access to social protection programs, and thus empower survivors with enduring routes toward leaving violent relationships.

4. Strengths and limitations of the study

One of the key strengths of the study lies in its context-specific focus, offering valuable insight into how economic vulnerability influences IPV within a particular community. The study focused on the victims, thereby shedding light on lived experiences that quantitative studies might overlook. Furthermore, examining structural economic factors such as unemployment and income disparities, the research addresses a critical yet underexplored IPV driver with the potential to inform targeted interventions and local policy responses. However, the study also faces certain limitations. Its findings may not be generalizable beyond Alexander Township due to the unique socio-economic dynamics of the area. The reliance on self-reported data introduces the risk of underreporting, as participants may withhold information due to fear, stigma, trauma, or sensitivity to the topic. Due to the topic's sensitivity, the researcher had to be extra careful when asking questions or probing to avoid secondary victimization. Despite these limitations, the study provides a meaningful contribution to understanding the intersection of economic inequality and gender-based violence.

5. Conclusions

In closing, the study noted that the intersection between IPV, unemployment among women, and economic inequality discloses the presence of acute socio-economic and psychological vulnerability, which sustains violence. Furthermore, the study revealed that economic dependence on violent partners often leads to loss of control, enhanced emotional manipulation, and diminished escape opportunities for safety and assistance. The results accord with resource deprivation theory that economic empowerment deprivation limits a woman's freedom to end violent situations and perpetuates cycles of violence and economic domination. Similarly, the study noted that income inequality also leads to additional power disparities within the household, increasing the likelihood of IPV. The study further noted that poor women, or those who are entirely unemployed, have a more challenging time accessing legal, psychological, and social assistance, further solidifying their vulnerability. Mitigating these economic limitations through structured interventions can drastically reduce the incidence and severity of IPV. Economic empowerment, job opportunities, and policy changes that target gendered pay disparities and economic abuse need to be given top priority to end this cycle. Unless measures are taken to combat them, poor women will continue to be disproportionately victimized by IPV, which creates a cycle of violence and dependence.

6. Recommendations

Governments and other non-state institutions should develop specialized schemes of vocational training in order to widen women's job opportunities further. Financial independence should be reinforced through expanded access to microfinance services and assistance to small-scale businesses so that women may have cheaper alternatives other than becoming economically reliant on relationships. Moreover, it is recommended that, for financial control and withholding of resources, policymakers must further broaden the criminal definition of IPV to include economic abuse. Reducing income inequality and decreasing the financial vulnerabilities that can heighten the risk of IPV can be done by enacting more stringent wage equity laws and

workplace protections for women. Similarly, availability of Social and Legal Support Networks, Expansion of emergency shelters, and provision of safe housing are of paramount importance to women escaping domestic violence, especially those with no or little resources. As such, victims of economic abuse can gain financial autonomy and access justice by taking advantage of free legal assistance services and economic assistance. Literacy and economic education can empower women with the skills to save, budget, and plan money, particularly in poor communities. Governments and nongovernment agencies must develop intensive vocational education programs to create more employment opportunities for women, particularly those with limited education. It could be encouraged with greater access to microfinance opportunities and entrepreneurship support, giving women legitimate alternatives for economic independence from partners.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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