



THE EFFECT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH: MODERATING ROLE OF CULTURAL NORMS

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Abstract

Domestic violence is a pervasive global issue that significantly affects women's physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing. It encompasses physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse, often occurring within intimate relationships. Among its many consequences, the impact on women's mental health is particularly severe, leading to long term psychological distress. This study investigates the effect of domestic violence on women's mental health, with a specific focus on the moderating role of cultural norms. Drawing on feminist theory, ecological theory, and social learning theory, the study posits that domestic violence negatively affects women's mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Empirical evidence indicates that women exposed to domestic violence frequently experience significant psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Cultural norms, including patriarchal beliefs, gender roles, and societal acceptance of violence, are expected to influence the strength of this relationship. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected from 300 women through structured questionnaires. Structural Equation Modeling using Smart PLS was used to test the proposed hypotheses. The findings reveal that domestic violence has a significant negative effect on women's mental health. Furthermore, cultural norms significantly moderate this relationship, such that in societies where violence is normalized or stigmatized, the psychological impact is more severe. The study concludes that while domestic violence directly harms mental health, cultural norms play a crucial role in either exacerbating or mitigating these effects. Addressing domestic violence therefore requires not only legal and institutional interventions but also cultural transformation.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Mental Health, Women, Cultural Norms, Psychological Wellbeing

Introduction

Domestic violence is a widespread social and public health issue that affects millions of women worldwide. It is defined as any form of physical, emotional, sexual, or economic abuse that occurs within intimate or familial relationships. Despite increased awareness and legal measures, domestic violence remains deeply embedded in many societies, often perpetuated by cultural norms and gender inequalities.

The impact of domestic violence extends beyond physical harm and includes profound psychological consequences. Women who experience domestic violence are at a significantly higher risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Research consistently shows that exposure to domestic violence leads to long term psychological trauma and emotional distress.

Mental health is a critical component of overall wellbeing and plays a vital role in individuals' ability to function effectively in society. Poor mental health can affect relationships, employment, and quality of life. In the context of domestic violence, mental health issues are often compounded by fear, isolation, and lack of support, making it difficult for victims to seek help.

Cultural norms play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward domestic violence. In many societies, traditional gender roles and patriarchal values may normalize or justify violence against women. These norms can discourage victims from reporting abuse and seeking support, thereby exacerbating the psychological impact. Cultural acceptance of violence has been identified as a key factor influencing both the prevalence and consequences of domestic violence.

Moreover, cultural stigma surrounding mental health can further prevent women from accessing psychological support. In societies where mental health issues are stigmatized, victims of domestic violence may be reluctant to seek help, leading to prolonged suffering and worsening mental health outcomes.

Recent studies highlight that domestic violence not only affects immediate mental health but can also have long lasting neurological and psychological consequences. Victims often experience chronic stress, emotional instability, and cognitive impairments, which can persist long after the abuse has ended.

In developing countries, including South Asian contexts, the problem is further exacerbated by socioeconomic factors, limited access to mental health services, and deeply rooted cultural norms. Research conducted in Pakistan, for example, shows that domestic violence significantly contributes to depression, anxiety, and stress among women.

Despite the growing body of literature, there is limited research examining how cultural norms influence the relationship between domestic violence and mental health. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the moderating role of cultural norms in this relationship.

Literature Review

Domestic violence is a multifaceted issue that has been extensively studied across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and public health. It encompasses various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual, and economic violence. Research indicates that domestic violence is one of the leading causes of poor mental health among women globally.

One of the most well documented effects of domestic violence is its impact on mental health. Studies have consistently shown that women who experience domestic violence are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. A systematic review found strong evidence linking domestic violence to a wide range of mental health disorders. These psychological effects are often long lasting and can significantly impair daily functioning.

The mechanisms through which domestic violence affects mental health are complex. Exposure to violence creates a state of chronic stress, which disrupts emotional regulation and cognitive functioning. Victims may develop feelings of fear, helplessness, and low self-esteem, which contribute to mental health problems.

In addition to psychological effects, domestic violence also has physical and neurological consequences. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to violence can lead to brain related issues, including trauma and cognitive impairment. This highlights the severity of the impact of domestic violence on overall health. Cultural norms play a critical role in shaping the prevalence and impact of domestic violence. In many societies, patriarchal values and traditional gender roles legitimize or tolerate violence against women. These norms influence both perpetrators and victims, often discouraging women from reporting abuse or seeking help.

Research suggests that cultural acceptance of violence increases the likelihood of domestic violence and exacerbates its psychological impact. Women living in such environments may internalize these norms, leading to feelings of guilt and self-blame. This can worsen mental health outcomes and reduce the likelihood of seeking support.

Conversely, supportive cultural environments that promote gender equality and condemn violence can mitigate the effects of domestic violence. In such contexts, victims are more likely to seek help and access resources, which can improve mental health outcomes.

The ecological framework provides a useful perspective for understanding domestic violence. It emphasizes the interaction between individual, relational, community, and societal factors. Cultural norms operate at the societal level and influence the behavior of individuals and institutions.

Recent research also highlights the role of interventions in improving mental health outcomes for victims of domestic violence. Therapeutic approaches, including counseling and mind body therapies, have been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on cultural acceptance and accessibility.

Overall, the literature indicates that domestic violence has a significant negative impact on women's mental health and that cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping this relationship.

Conceptual Model / Theoretical Framework

Independent Variable

- Domestic violence

Dependent Variable

- Women's mental health

Moderating Variable

- Cultural norms

Theoretical Foundations

- Feminist theory
- Ecological systems theory
- Social learning theory

Methodology

A quantitative cross sectional research design was adopted. Data were collected from 300 women using structured questionnaires based on Likert scales. Smart PLS was used to assess measurement and structural models.

Analysis

Table 1 Measurement Model

Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Domestic Violence	0.92	0.94	0.73
Mental Health	0.90	0.93	0.71
Cultural Norms	0.89	0.92	0.70

Table 2 Structural Model

Path	Beta	t value	p value
DV → MH	-0.55	7.50	0.000

Table 3 Moderation

Path	Beta	t value
Cultural Norms moderates DV → MH	0.30	4.20

Interpretation of Table 1:

The measurement model assessment confirms that the constructs of domestic violence, women’s mental health, and cultural norms demonstrate strong psychometric properties in terms of reliability and validity. Reliability was initially assessed using Cronbach alpha coefficients, and all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. Specifically, domestic violence reported a Cronbach alpha of 0.92, mental health 0.90, and cultural norms 0.89. These values indicate a high level of internal consistency, suggesting that the items used to measure each construct are stable and consistently reflect the underlying theoretical dimensions.

Composite reliability values further reinforce the reliability of the constructs. All values are above 0.90, which is considered excellent in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. Composite reliability is particularly important because it accounts for differences in item loadings and provides a more accurate estimate of construct reliability compared to Cronbach alpha (Hair et al., 2021). The high composite reliability values indicate that the indicators collectively provide a consistent and reliable measurement of the latent constructs.

Convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted, and all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50. Domestic violence reported an AVE of 0.73, mental health 0.71, and cultural norms 0.70. These values indicate that more than 50 percent of the variance in the observed indicators is explained by their respective constructs, confirming that the items are strongly associated with the underlying variables.

The establishment of convergent validity ensures that the measurement items accurately represent the theoretical constructs, reducing the likelihood of measurement error. This is critical for ensuring that the relationships observed in the structural model are valid and not influenced by inaccuracies in measurement. Furthermore, the strong psychometric properties of the measurement model enhance the credibility of the study. A reliable and valid measurement model is essential for Structural Equation Modeling, as it provides a solid foundation for testing hypothesized relationships among constructs.

Overall, the results indicate that the measurement model meets all the necessary criteria for reliability and validity. This confirms that the constructs are appropriate for further analysis and supports the robustness of the study findings.

Interpretation of Table 2:

The structural model results provide strong empirical evidence regarding the relationship between domestic violence and women’s mental health. The findings indicate that domestic violence has a significant and

negative effect on mental health ($\beta = -0.55, p < 0.001$). This suggests that increased exposure to domestic violence is associated with poorer mental health outcomes among women.

This result aligns with a substantial body of literature that identifies domestic violence as a major risk factor for mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Exposure to violence creates a state of chronic psychological stress, which disrupts emotional stability and cognitive functioning. Victims often experience persistent fear, helplessness, and low self-esteem, all of which contribute to mental health deterioration.

The magnitude of the path coefficient indicates that domestic violence is a strong predictor of mental health outcomes. This highlights the severity of its impact and underscores the importance of addressing domestic violence as a public health issue. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing domestic violence could have significant benefits for improving women's mental health.

The negative relationship can also be explained through stress and trauma theories, which emphasize the long-term psychological effects of exposure to traumatic events. Domestic violence represents a form of repeated trauma, which can lead to cumulative psychological damage over time.

Additionally, the findings highlight the role of environmental stressors in shaping mental health outcomes. Domestic violence often occurs in contexts characterized by social isolation, economic dependency, and lack of support, which further exacerbate its impact on mental health.

The results also suggest that mental health outcomes are influenced not only by the presence of violence but also by the severity and duration of exposure. Women who experience prolonged or severe violence are likely to exhibit more significant psychological distress.

Overall, the structural model provides strong support for the hypothesis that domestic violence negatively affects women's mental health. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive interventions that address both the prevention of violence and the provision of mental health support for victims.

Interpretation of Table 3:

The moderation analysis provides important insights into the role of cultural norms in shaping the relationship between domestic violence and women's mental health. The results indicate that cultural norms significantly moderate this relationship ($\beta = 0.30, t = 4.20$), suggesting that the impact of domestic violence on mental health varies depending on the prevailing cultural context.

Cultural norms encompass societal beliefs, values, and practices related to gender roles and the acceptability of violence. In societies where domestic violence is normalized or justified, the psychological impact on victims tends to be more severe. This is because victims may internalize these norms, leading to feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame, which exacerbate mental health problems.

The positive moderation effect indicates that cultural norms can intensify the negative impact of domestic violence on mental health. In environments where violence is accepted, victims are less likely to seek help or report abuse, which prolongs their exposure to violence and increases psychological distress.

Furthermore, cultural stigma surrounding mental health can prevent victims from accessing support services. In societies where mental health issues are stigmatized, individuals may avoid seeking help due to fear of social judgment. This can lead to untreated mental health conditions and worsening outcomes.

Conversely, in cultures that promote gender equality and condemn violence, the negative impact of domestic violence on mental health may be less severe. Supportive cultural environments encourage victims to seek help and provide access to resources, which can mitigate the psychological effects of violence.

The findings highlight the importance of considering cultural context when addressing domestic violence and mental health. Interventions that are not culturally sensitive may be less effective in addressing the needs of victims.

Overall, the moderation analysis demonstrates that cultural norms play a critical role in shaping the relationship between domestic violence and mental health. It emphasizes the need for culturally informed policies and interventions that address both the root causes of violence and its psychological consequences.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that domestic violence has a profound and detrimental impact on women's mental health. The results confirm that exposure to domestic violence significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These findings are consistent with previous empirical studies that identify domestic violence as a major public health concern with long term psychological consequences.

A key contribution of this study is the identification of cultural norms as a significant moderating factor. The results indicate that cultural norms can either exacerbate or mitigate the impact of domestic violence on mental health. In societies where violence is normalized or justified, the psychological effects are more severe due to increased stigma, victim blaming, and lack of support.

This finding is consistent with feminist theory, which emphasizes the role of patriarchal structures in perpetuating gender-based violence. Cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality create an environment in which domestic violence is tolerated, thereby increasing its prevalence and impact.

The study also highlights the importance of addressing both individual and societal factors in tackling domestic violence. While individual level interventions such as counseling and therapy are important, they may not be sufficient in the absence of broader cultural change.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that efforts to reduce domestic violence must include strategies aimed at transforming cultural norms. This may involve public awareness campaigns, education programs, and legal reforms that promote gender equality and condemn violence.

Conclusion with recommendations

This study concludes that domestic violence is a critical determinant of women's mental health, with significant negative effects on psychological wellbeing. The findings indicate that women who experience domestic violence are more likely to suffer from mental health disorders, highlighting the need for urgent intervention.

The study also demonstrates that cultural norms play a crucial moderating role in this relationship. Cultural beliefs and practices influence how domestic violence is perceived and addressed, thereby shaping its impact on mental health. In societies where violence is normalized, the psychological effects are more severe due to stigma and lack of support.

Practical Recommendations

Governments should strengthen legal frameworks to prevent domestic violence and protect victims. This includes strict enforcement of laws and provision of support services. Public awareness campaigns should be implemented to challenge harmful cultural norms and promote gender equality.

Mental health services should be made more accessible, particularly for victims of domestic violence. Community based programs should be developed to support victims and encourage reporting of abuse.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should explore additional moderating variables such as social support and economic independence. Longitudinal research can provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of domestic violence on mental health.

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