



Exploring Motivations for Domestic Violence by Women in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Both women and men suffer from domestic violence around the world. While domestic violence against women has received considerable research attention, domestic violence against men has been under-studied, especially in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The limited data available from the National Family Safety Registry of Saudi Arabia and the National Society for Human Rights suggest that female-perpetrated domestic violence has been increasing in Saudi Arabia. This research therefore aims to understand the reasons why women commit violence against men in Saudi Arabia. The study uses a qualitative research method, using data obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted at a women's prison in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, with 30 women who were incarcerated for committing violence against men. Thematic analysis shows that participants in this study committed their offence due to two main reasons: self-defense and emancipatory longing. While some participants reported being abused and mistreated, leading them to commit violence to protect themselves, others reported actively using violence against men out of frustration and a desire to be free from oppressive patriarchal practices. The study also provides evidence that institutions can act as spaces of freedom for women frustrated with patriarchal practices and wanting freedom from oppression. Patriarchal practices can be a source of great frustration for women and can motivate them to commit violence. The Saudi government has taken steps to address such practices; however, for effective change to occur there remains a need for change in the societal mindset about the role of women.

Keywords Domestic violence · women's violence · Female offenders · Saudi Arabia · Patriarchy

Female-perpetrated domestic violence has received little academic attention compared with domestic violence perpetrated by male offenders (Pornari et al. 2013). While some researchers question the prevalence of female-perpetrated domestic violence (Celeste Walley-Jean and Swan 2009), others maintain that it is ultimately women who are the victims because female offending and female victimization go together (Liddell and Martinovic 2013). Various studies have shown that women arrested on domestic violence charges are mostly acting in self-defense (Ross 2011; Shorey et al. 2010). However, other evidence challenges this assertion and establishes different reasons for the use of violence by women (Douglass et al. 2020; Elmquist et al. 2014).

Female-Perpetrated Domestic Violence

It must be acknowledged from the outset that, in domestic violence cases, women remain at a considerable disadvantage compared with men (Walby and Towers 2018). Nonetheless, there is growing evidence to suggest that women are as likely as men to be perpetrators of domestic violence. Among the earliest evidence of comparable rates of violence used by men and women was a study by Steinmetz (1977-1978). This was followed by Straus and Gelles (1986) and corroborated by more recent studies (e.g., Straus and Ramirez 2007; Archer 2004). Some studies have even found there to be a higher prevalence of female-perpetrated violence (e.g., Thornton et al. 2010).

More recently, Buzawa and Buzawa (2017) reported that at least 30 men are killed each year in Germany as a result of domestic violence inflicted by a female partner. A study of college students at a Portuguese public university, by Começanha, Basto-Pereira, and Maia (Começanha et al. 2017, p. 120), found that “women reported significantly more

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instigations of psychological abusive acts” and opined that these findings were “away from the traditional view of women as victims and men as perpetrators” (p. 124).

There is some variation in the prevalence of female-perpetrated domestic violence reported in studies compared with the prevalence in reports produced using official statistics. In England and Wales, for example, statistics compiled by the Office of National Statistics (2019) suggest that in the year ending March 2019, 7 in 100 women and 4 in 100 men aged 16 to 74 years had experienced domestic abuse.

It has been argued that due to the social view of domestic violence being predominantly male-perpetrated, there is more reluctance among men to report being abused or victimized and to seek professional help (Machado et al. 2017). This may be due to many reasons. There is a perception that male victimization is not harmful or severe (Machado et al. 2017). Female on male violence is also often perceived as “less frequent, less problematic, and less consequential than male-to-female” violence (Espinoza and Warner 2016, p. 960). Females have a lesser likelihood of being assigned responsibility for violence by both genders (Sylaska and Walters 2014), are less likely to be reported as perpetrators (Hester 2012), and assertions of self-defense by men are less likely to be believed; Douglas and Hines (2011) reported that male victims reporting abuse were seen as the primary aggressor, were not provided help by law enforcement agencies, and were refused access to aid programs. Machado et al. (2017) also highlighted studies that showed male victims of domestic abuse suffer negative psychological effects, such as thoughts of suicide, disassociation, and avoidance.

Motivations for Female-Perpetrated Domestic Violence

There has been considerable debate regarding the motivations for women’s use of violence (Portnoy et al. 2020). The predominant view is that women generally commit acts of violence as self-defense (Douglass et al. 2020; Leisring 2012). This view is also supported by feminist theory, where female-perpetrated domestic violence is seen as reactive, resulting from male partners being the dominant aggressors (Hamel and Russell 2013). However, Douglass et al. (2020, p. 32) argue that the self-defense view of women’s violence “not only deprives women of agency but also means that their victims are not taken as seriously, and rehabilitation programs for female offenders are scarce.” Additionally, Leisring and Grigorian (2016) argue that studies often overlap self-defense with retaliation and that differentiating these two motivations has important implications for legal consequences and interventions. A study by Elmquist et al. (2014) found that women were more likely than men to use violence in retaliation. Anger has also been identified as a common theme in the

motivation of women’s use of violence (Flemke and Allen 2008). While some of these studies listed anger as the primary factor, others considered anger in combination with another motivation, such as jealousy (Caldwell et al. 2009). Fear has also been found to be a primary motivation for violence by women (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012). Nonetheless, a comprehensive review on the motivations for intimate partner violence by Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012) found there was significant overlap between men and women’s use of violence.

Female-Perpetrated Domestic Violence in Saudi Arabia

Studies on female-perpetrated domestic violence in Saudi Arabia are lacking. According to the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Justice, its courts saw 8016 cases of domestic violence against women during 2016. During the same period, the courts also saw 8020 cases of domestic violence by women against men, including physical and psychological abuse (Aldosari 2017). This does not mean, however, that there are more cases of domestic violence against men than against women. Many cases of domestic violence go unreported, and the actual prevalence of such abuse has been difficult to measure in Saudi Arabia. It is similarly difficult to accurately measure the prevalence of domestic violence perpetrated by women against men in Saudi Arabia, as many male victims do not report such incidents (Lambert 2014).

In 2014, the Riyadh-based Waei Centre for Social Advice received approximately 557,000 calls from Saudi men seeking help as victims of domestic violence at the hands of their wives. Most of these men anonymously reported violence against them and did not submit an official complaint against their wives; therefore, these cases would not have been recorded as domestic violence cases and may have impacted the number of court proceedings. In Saudi Arabia, domestic violence cases are only treated as crimes when the victim actively reports them and presses charges (Alhabdan 2015). In the absence of charges being pressed, the case is simply treated as a family dispute and is subject to family law (Mallat 2017). Domestic violence committed against male guardians has also been highlighted by the National Family Safety Registry of Saudi Arabia. In 2019, it showed 112 substantiated cases of abuse by women against men.

Given this background, it is important to understand the reasons for female-perpetrated domestic violence in Saudi Arabia, particularly because such a form of violence occurs in a very different context compared with the West, due to the existence of patriarchal practices in the country, in particular the guardianship system and polygamy.

The practice of guardianship requires that every Saudi woman must have a male guardian, typically a father or

husband, but it may be her brother, grandfather, uncle, or son. The guardian is responsible for making a range of important decisions on the woman’s behalf. The extent of this practice is such that, generally, adult women cannot work, travel, study, or marry without permission from their guardian (Shukri 1999), although steps are being taken by the Saudi government to rectify this issue.

Polygamy – the practice of a man taking more than one wife – is considered by many Saudi men and women to be a right granted by the Sharia. Nevertheless, for many Saudi women, polygamy exacerbates the already negative consequences of patriarchal control over women, and they regard polygamy as a form of abuse (Yamani 2008). Accordingly, resistance to the practices of guardianship and polygamy is growing, thanks to increasing opportunities in education and employment as more Saudi women pursue an education and engage in paid work (Shiraz 2016).

Given the patriarchal nature of Saudi society and the perceived oppression it can result in, self-defense could be considered a primary motive for women who commit domestic violence offences in Saudi Arabia. However, I argue that the situation is not that straightforward. The difficulty lies in the context of what should be perceived as violence. Evidently, a woman protecting herself from physical abuse by her husband or family member can be seen as self-defense. However, it is difficult to consider a woman’s assault against her husband who denies her rights as an act of self-defense unless that denial is itself described as an act of violence. Against this background, this study aims to understand the causes of female-perpetrated domestic violence against their guardians (male family members) in Saudi Arabia.

Method

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the reasons for female-perpetrated domestic violence in Saudi Arabia and utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data. A thematic approach was used to analyze the data and provide a structured framework for understanding and describing the motivations of women who perpetrate domestic violence in Saudi Arabia.

Participants

The sample comprised 30 women at a women-only prison in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, who had been convicted of a domestic violence offence against their guardian. Table 1 provides a summary of participant characteristics.

As shown in Table 2, half of the respondents were convicted for attempted murder; most respondents were serving a life sentence. Although seven respondents were given sentences of up to five years, in Saudi Arabia, a woman cannot

Table 1 Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants Interviewed for this Study

	n	%
Relationship Status		
Single	8	27%
Married	13	43%
Married (polygamy)	4	13%
Divorced	5	17%
Age		
Less than 18 years	1	3%
18–24 years	3	10%
25–30 years	15	50%
31–35 years	3	10%
36–40 years	8	27%
Education		
No education	10	33%
Primary level	1	3%
Secondary level	6	20%
Bachelor’s degree	11	37%
Master’s degree	2	7%
Employment		
Unemployed	21	70%
Teacher	4	13%
Cleaner	3	10%
Banker	1	3%
Businesswoman	1	3%
Children		
No children	8	27%
1 to 3 children	12	40%
More than 3 children	10	33%

leave prison without her guardian’s approval. The sentence for three participants had not been decided at the time of interview. Saudi Arabia does not have a codified criminal law

Table 2 Characteristics of Offence Committed by Participants Interviewed for this Study

	n	%
Victim		
Husband	16	53%
Brother	12	40%
Uncle	1	3%
Father-in-law	1	3%
Offence		
Assault	11	37%
Attempted murder	15	50%
Attempted murder (burning)	2	7%
Murder	2	7%
Sentence		
Up to 5 years	7	23%
Up to 10 years	2	7%
Up to 15 years	3	10%
Life sentence	13	43%
Capital punishment	2	7%
Pending	3	10%

system; therefore, courts have substantial discretion when making judgements. This can often result in different sentences for similar offences. Additionally, capital punishment is still allowed in Saudi Arabia; this had been announced for two participants at the time of the interviews. The majority of crimes had been committed against husbands, followed by brothers.

Procedures

Help in recruiting participants was sought from a social worker working at the prison, who had access to all inmate files ($n = 150$) and could identify 62 women who had been convicted of domestic violence offences. The women identified were asked by the social worker if they wished to participate in the study. The women were given clear guidance about the study's purpose and how any information gathered would be used. They were informed about the research procedure, assured about their anonymity, and that participation was not mandatory and that they would not be forced to take part. Once participants agreed to take part, and prior to their interview, each participant was provided with an information sheet and a consent form by FK. Participants were reminded about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide a reason.

The recruitment process posed some challenges as the participants were particularly vulnerable. Anonymity, therefore, was essential and this was emphasized to participants. To ensure participant anonymity, assurances were sought from the Ministry of Justice in Saudi Arabia and the Prison Governor, and guards near the interview area were required to sign a confidentiality statement. Participants were also informed about instances where their anonymity could not be assured. This included circumstances where any information disclosed to FK by a participant gave FK good reason to believe that the participant might be at risk of significant harm or posed a risk of harm to others due to their actions. FK strictly adhered to the policies of the Saudi authorities when interviewing participants, to ensure the safety of both the participants and the researcher.

This study formed part of a PhD project. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Research Ethics Committee, and permission to interview participants was obtained from the Ministry of Local Affairs in Saudi Arabia. Ethical approval was sought prior to the commencement of the data collection phase of the research.

Data Collection

Information from participants was gathered via semi-structured interviews, which provided a flexible way to obtain rich data from the participants. The interviews took place between October and December 2014 in a safe and secure

environment within the prison. Office space was provided by the prison authorities and participants were accompanied to and from the office by a security guard. Two female security guards and a social worker were stationed outside the interview room in case of any emergency.

To make the participants feel as comfortable as possible, FK started with a friendly conversation. This was intended to avert any uncomfortable feelings that could dominate the interview, had FK directly started the interview session. Therefore, the interviews became more relaxed as the respondents and FK became familiar with each other.

The interviews lasted between 45 min to one hour, were digitally recorded, and notes were taken with the permission of the participants. All interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated into English following transcription by FK.

Interview Guide

The interview schedule used for this study was divided into four parts and combined two sets of questions: factual questions covering personal characteristics and events and exploratory questions covering respondents' feelings, experiences, and attitudes. Part one focused on participants living arrangements and family composition, including experience of polygamous relationship if applicable. Examples of questions asked in this part include: (a) Can you explain more about your marriage status and your role within the family household? (b) What do you feel about polygamy and your status in your polygamous marriage (if in a polygamous relationship)?

Part two focused on education. Examples of questions asked include: (a) Can you describe your educational status, and why did you (or did you not) think getting an education was (or was not) important? (b) What are the views of the male family members regarding the female family members holding or not holding an educational qualification?

Part three focused on employment. Questions included: (a) When you hear the term career what does this mean to you, and why? (b) Would catering for the house and family be regarded as a career? (c) Is your family supportive of your career (if employed)?

The central focus of part four of the interview, which also consists of the main part of the interview, was the offence. Questions designed for this part sought to understand the circumstances and/or motivations that led to the offence and how the participants felt about committing the offence, for example: (i) Can you describe the offence you are currently serving a sentence for? (ii) What were the events that led to the incident?

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used for data analysis. This provided a structured framework

for describing and understanding the motivations of the women who had perpetrated domestic violence. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by FK. The initial transcription was undertaken in Arabic to ensure that certain linguistic nuances could be identified and later appropriately translated into English. This was important, as the meaning of certain words, for example *masalahalzaouage* (marriage matters), *almaa* (obedience) and *alghdoe* (obligation), is heavily influenced by the prevalent culture and norms in Saudi Arabia, as well as the religion of Islam.

A translator who was fluent in Arabic and English was also asked to translate the Arabic interviews into English. Once completed, the two translations were compared, and any inconsistencies were discussed. The transcription process also helped FK familiarize herself with the data, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Following transcription, the transcripts were coded inductively by FK. The coding process was discussed with a senior colleague, well versed in the subject of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia, for improvements. During this process, similar emerging patterns and accounts were selected and added to nodes, using NVIVO software. Nodes were developed both within and across the interview transcripts, as this allowed for the grouping, categorization, and recording of information into themes and sub-themes. Following the identification of an initial set of themes, they were reviewed, defined, named, and selected for analysis. All results and interview excerpts use pseudonyms to ensure participants' anonymity.

With a view to maintaining credibility and trustworthiness, the coding of interviews and the subsequent interpretation by the lead researcher was discussed extensively with a senior colleague knowledgeable in the area of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia. The lead researcher recognizes that credibility may be limited due to a lack of involvement of participants in interpreting the findings. However, the accounts provided by the participants are considered true and honest reflection of their personal experiences and no participant was forced to take part in the study. The participants provided details of their experience willingly.

Reflexivity Statement

The author is a Saudi woman and single mother who has not directly experienced issues related to domestic violence but has provided support to women that have experienced such ordeals. The author aims to use this research to highlight the increasing issue to domestic violence and how this is linked with prevalent patriarchal practices in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the author has analyzed the data with a view to understanding why women in Saudi Arabia may commit violence and present their experience in substantial detail. While analyzing the data, the author

routinely engaged in self-reflection to ensure that personal biases did not impact the analysis. For this reason, the author took steps described previously to maintain trustworthiness.

Results

Self-Defense

The definition of self-defense used in this study follows that of Garner and Black (2014) and is understood to be a reactive action taken by a participant to protect herself from imminent danger. It was clear from participants' experiences that the majority of them had been subjected to long-term abuse and mistreatment. The abuse suffered by participants comprised physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. For example, Souad was beaten, denied food and water, and physically restrained in her room by her husband. Mnerah reported being beaten daily by her husband, as did Afrah, who reported that her husband beat both her and her children. Sexual abuse was reported by Sarah, whose father allowed her uncle to rape her in exchange for drugs. Foz reported that her brother beat her very frequently and prevented her from eating and drinking. Maruam mentioned that her husband abused both her and her children and always tried to control her.

These and many other respondents described situations where they used violence as a last resort. They felt that their lives were in danger and therefore had to react immediately in the moment to protect themselves in a violent situation. One participant, Badreah, recalling an escalation of violence against her at the time of the offence, stated:

I assaulted [my husband] with a piece of metal because he wanted to kill me, and I had to defend myself. I did not want him to kill me, and I had no other solution (Badreah, uneducated, unemployed, married).

Participants also reported feeling helpless and said they did not feel supported by their guardians, even during periods of prolonged abuse by male family members. Samah, for example, recalled:

My husband's father tried to rape me and have sex with me, and he treated me harshly. I did not know what to do. If I were to tell my husband, he would not believe me and would hit me. One day, my husband's father came to my room to rape me. I could not escape, [and] then when he was raping me, I assaulted him to escape. My husband informed the police to take me to prison (Samah, uneducated, unemployed, married).

Emancipatory Longing

Several participants, especially those that were educated, mentioned emancipatory longing and freedom as their motivation for using violence against their guardians. These participants held education and employment to be key factors for their emancipation and expressed clear dissatisfaction with being denied such opportunities by their guardians.

The importance of education for some participants can be summarized by Maruam's statement:

I have a bachelor's degree. Education to me is very important. For me, education means liberation, independence, awareness of human rights, and rejecting injustice. Also, education helped me to establish good relationships with people around me, it helped me to know my rights, and know that I should not be subjected to injustice at the hands of men and the arbitrary laws they have made.

Participants said that they preferred to look for employment to help them gain financial independence; however, they were met with resistance from their guardians.

I am teacher, but my husband prevented me from living a good life. He just said, "you are women, you should look after the children and keep silent". He did not even allow me to discuss any issues with him, because I was a woman. (Salwa, educated, employed, polygamy as first wife)

There was a strong feeling among participants that male members of their household had a very narrow view of a woman's role in a household, which comprised sex, cooking, and childcare. Participants felt their guardians had negative perceptions regarding female education and employment and stated that men in their household did not encourage education. One respondent, who was educated and was employed prior to her offence, stated, "Men in my house are uneducated and do not encourage education". Another respondent underlined that male family members in her household were not encouraging or supportive in this matter at all. Such views were obviously at odds with the views expressed by the educated women, who emphasized the importance of education and work.

I tried to discuss my rights with my husband many times, but he refused every time. He said, "you are just a woman; you do not have any rights. You are just for having sex, cooking, and you should stay at home" (Njod, educated, unemployed, polygamy as first wife).

Participants also stressed that men were happy to assert their rights when it came to polygamy, even at the expense of ignoring the rights afforded to women by religion. As Njod continued:

...Then my husband decided to marry again. I asked him why, and he said it was his right as a man and the religion gave him this right. I told him that our religion allows men to marry again only if his wife is ill or she cannot give birth, but he refused to listen to me.

Such events were a clear source of frustration for these participants, as they felt trapped in their relationships. Despite being educated, participants felt that their guardians wanted to control their lives and refused to give them permission to seek work.

Even though I had a bachelor's degree, I could not get a job because my husband refused to give me permission to look for one. This is where all my problems started. I tried many times to convince him that I am human, it is my right to continue education and have a job, but he kept refusing. (Arwa, educated, unemployed, married).

Many workplaces in Saudi Arabia will not employ women unless they have permission from their guardians. For some participants that were married, frustrations were further compounded when they tried to obtain a divorce, a right also denied by their guardian.

I have rights, and I need to defend my rights... I need to feel free; I need to feel like a human. I asked my husband for divorce, but he refused that too. He just wanted to control every aspect of my life. I am really a slave in this society. At one time, my husband left me for five years with my family without any reason and at the same time he refused to divorce me. He still wanted to control me even after he left me. (Arwa, educated, unemployed, married)

For these participants, patriarchal practices and their subsequent use to deny them their rights was akin to abuse.

The guardianship system is a kind of women abuse because it treats women as a child or mental people who cannot decide for themselves. I cannot accept this law because I am an adult and I can make decisions for myself (Salwa, educated, employed, polygamy as first wife).

Being denied their rights, frustrations with the patriarchal system, and not having any help or support to overcome these

issues, led many participants to feel they had no choice but to resort to violence.

I need my freedom and my rights as a human being. I need to live an independent life. I want to feel that I am a human being. This is my right and I refuse to be controlled in every aspect of my life like a slave. My guardian is a man, but I am a human too... I am just fed up of being controlled and I just want my rights, my liberation, and my dignity. I could not bear being denied my rights, so I decided to fight against my guardian and assault him to escape this slavery life. Now I am happy in prison. Here I feel more liberated and in control of my life than back home with my guardian (Maha, educated, employed, single)

Safe-Life: Dependence on Guardians

The women interviewed expressed different opinions about patriarchal practices; while some accepted them, others rejected them and expressed their longing for liberation. Education appeared to be the key difference in how the women felt about living in a patriarchal society. Educated women expressed feelings of frustration with patriarchal practices and a desire to escape them more often than the uneducated women, who were more likely to accept such practices and view them as ordained by religion or culture.

Polygamy is from Islam. I have to accept it as my God allowed men to marry more than one wife. I don't know why, but I have to accept it; because men are distinguished by God Almighty as being more rational and able to act more wisely than women, because women are weak beings and do not know what to do. That's why Allah allowed men to marry more than one wife, to protect women and provide a safe life to them (Farah, uneducated, unemployed, polygamy as second wife).

The idea of a safe life was also echoed by other uneducated participants. They felt that their husband or guardian provided a safe and secure life for them and that it would be wrong to disobey them.

I am a housewife and I acquiesce in all the rights of my husband as a man and as my guardian, but he hit me and abused me. I could not ask him to divorce me because I cannot live a safe life without a man. I tried to defend myself and my children from abuse, but I could not. He is my guardian and I should accept everything (Bdoor, uneducated, unemployed, married).

Not only did these participants feel it was their religious duty to accept patriarchal practices but they also felt that liberation as a concept was against their religion.

I believe that the men are better than women and they provide a safe life to women. I have to obey the men because Islam asks us to do that. I respect my guardian in order to be a good Muslim. The concept of liberation comes from western countries to challenge Islam (Ahlam, uneducated, unemployed, married).

The concept of a safe life in this context indicates being provided for financially by a guardian. Some participants therefore felt compelled to bear their guardian's abuse due to their dependency on their guardian. This opinion aligns with the view of conservative segments of Saudi society, who justify the male guardianship system in religious terms (Doumato 1999). According to conservatives, the ideal woman in Saudi society stays at home, looks after the house, and raises children, while her male guardian is the breadwinner (Doumato 1999). Within this arrangement, women are expected to submit to their male guardian. Uneducated women in particular appear to embrace these notions in relation to their role within a marriage. Nonetheless, when faced with imminent danger to their lives, participants did react in self-defense to protect themselves.

I believe that I have to obey him as my guardian because he provides a safe life for me. But I hit him in response to an attack to save my life because he was abusing me (Hamadh, uneducated, unemployed, divorced).

Jealousy and Retribution

For participants that were in a polygamous relationship, retribution and jealousy were also motivating factors in the use of violence. Farah, for example, was not happy that her husband was treating his second wife better than he was treating her.

My husband married again. I did not refuse this because it is an aspect of his rights as a man... but kept hitting me every day and he treated his second wife better than me. I wanted to stop him. (Farah, uneducated, unemployed, polygamy as second wife).

Prior to her husband marrying again (for a third time), Farah said that she "tried to stop him" and reason with him; however, she said that "he did not care about my feelings and my rights". Farah subsequently decided to burn the entire wedding venue where her husband would marry again.

Incarceration as a Form of Liberation

The frustrations faced by participants, combined with the attitudes of their guardians towards women's rights, led to conflict largely because participants felt either helpless under the guardianship system or eventually unwanted within a polygamous relationship. Such conflicts escalated to violence when women were unable to resolve them through other means. In other words, these conflicts led them to plan acts of violence out of frustration and to escape the constraints of guardianship or polygamy. For some participants, the desire for liberation from such repressive systems was so strong that they deliberately planned their offences in advance so that they could be sent to prison.

... I have rights and I want to defend my rights. My brother prevents me from applying for a job and treats me like a child. He controls everything in my life and does not allow me to go out. I need my rights, but the law and the values give him the right to control me. Many times, I reflected on running away, but the police would bring me back to my brother. That's why I decided to assault him to go to prison to obtain my liberation from my guardian (Abeer, educated, unemployed and single)

Women that are convicted and imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for any offence cannot leave prison unless accompanied by a consenting guardian. Additionally, due to the social stigma in conservative Saudi society attached to women who offend, guardians generally prefer to leave women in prison for the rest of their lives. Indeed, the reasoning on the part of some educated participants behind committing their offence was precisely that their guardians would not allow them to leave prison for the rest of their lives.

I attacked my brother with a knife and now I will be in prison all my life. I am happy because I know that my brother will never allow me to leave prison. I have access to food and drink here and no one tries to control me (Tafadh, educated, unemployed, divorced).

Discussion

This study explored the motivation for Saudi women to commit acts of violence against their guardians (male family members). The findings suggest that emancipatory longing and self-defense played a significant role in motivating participants to commit violent acts.

The majority of participants in this study faced violence and abuse from male members of their family and/or their

spouses. The abuse took all forms – physical, sexual, and verbal – and in many cases had a negative impact on the mental well-being of the respondent. Frequently, an offence was committed out of fear for life, i.e., in self-defense. This is consistent with several previous studies that suggested domestic violence committed by women is mainly self-defense (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012; Ross 2011; Shorey et al. 2010). This finding is also consistent with the feminist theory of domestic violence, where violence by women is seen as reactive, mainly in response to men being the dominant aggressors (Hamel and Russell 2013).

It is important here to consider the overlap between retaliation and self-defense as a motivator for violence (Leisring and Grigorian 2016). Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012) argue that more work is required to differentiate between retaliation and self-defense. Previously, retaliation has been linked with emotional hurt and anger (Shorey et al. 2010). It is clear from the narrative provided by participants in the present study that the majority of them resorted to violence while being subjected to abuse, out of fear for their own lives. However, despite being subjected to prolonged abuse and mistreatment, many participants did not retaliate, out of fear of losing a safe life. The majority of participants were financially dependent on their guardian and therefore felt compelled to bear the abuse. These participants only used violence when they felt that their lives were in danger. There were, however, some participants, e.g., Farah, who clearly acted in retaliation for being emotionally hurt by their guardian. Although the narrative provided by participants does differentiate between retaliation and self-defense, this difference could have been improved through the use of a self-defense aggression scale (Shorey et al. 2010).

Self-defense as a primary motivator for violence was mainly cited by participants that were uneducated. Participants that were educated on the other hand, clearly expressed their frustration with the prevalent patriarchal practices in Saudi Arabia. Participants' responses suggest that male family members were using the guardianship system to maintain control over women. Under the guardianship system, women need their guardian's permission to seek employment – in many cases, participants were repeatedly refused this permission. The guardianship system not only restricted opportunities for employment for these participants but in many cases also facilitated the conditions where violence was committed against the participants. Thus, participants' frustrations can be said to emanate from the patriarchal system to begin with.

Many participants highlighted how their frustrations ultimately led to them committing acts of violence against their guardians. Participants complained that they were not allowed to work or seek education, even after they had tried to reason with their guardians. Divergent views on women's rights to education and employment were a serious source of conflict between women and their husbands/guardians.

Such negative perceptions regarding women's education and employment were also noted by Elamin and Omair (2010). Their study revealed that Saudi males tend to show a very traditional attitude toward women's role in society – that men are dominant, independent, competitive, and capable of leadership, whereas women are submissive, dependent, caring, and good for domestic tasks and childcare. However, Elamin and Omair (2010) also concluded that young, educated Saudi males have a less traditional attitude toward women's role in society, compared with older, married, and less educated Saudi males.

Participants in polygamous relationships considered this to be a form of abuse. Participants in such relationships felt that, in addition to being denied access to education and employment, men were quick to assert their own religious rights when it came to marrying multiple women. According to Yamani (2008), one reason why polygamy is so prevalent in Saudi Arabia is because extra-marital affairs are considered wrong; therefore, men marry more than one woman to make their relationships legitimate. However, as expressed by one respondent, Islam does have strict restrictions on men who wish to marry more than one woman, although they are not always observed. These restrictions are embodied in the following verse of the Quran:

If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice two, or three, or four; But if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), Then only one (Quran 4:3).

The participants of this research who were in polygamous relationships stated that they had often been neglected and that their rights had not been fulfilled. This contributed to feelings of injustice, jealousy, and anger among women. Although an important finding, further research is required in this area to formulate more robust conclusions about the links among polygamy, jealousy, and women's motivation for violence. Current research into domestic violence in polygamous relationships mainly considers violence by men toward their wives (e.g., Jansen and Agadjanian 2020). Not all participants expressed frustrations with patriarchal practices. Participants with no education considered such practices to be religious rights of men and bore the abuse and mistreatment due to their dependence on their guardians.

It has been argued that the acceptance and prevalence of patriarchal practices is a problem of Islam as a religion. Specialists who have studied the Arab regions have been careful to note that this is due to various interpretations blended with cultural practices and power relations within the Arab regions that contribute to the disempowerment of women (Blyades and Linzer 2008). Scholars have noted that the system of guardianship does not exist in many non-Arab Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey, and

Bangladesh; in fact, these countries have had women leaders in the past (Rizzo et al. 2007). Saudi women have in the past tried to fight the practice of guardianship through legal means but have largely failed in bringing about substantial change (Hamdan 2005). The findings from the present study provide further insight into such frustrations faced by Saudi women, especially among those who are educated.

Another important finding that arose from this study was that many participants deliberately planned and committed their offence so that they would be sent to prison. This was generally carried out by participants who were educated. Some participants openly stated they were happier in prison and that they felt "more liberated and in control" of their life in prison as opposed to being under their guardians. Women who are convicted and imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for any offence cannot leave prison unless accompanied by a consenting guardian. Additionally, due to the social stigma in conservative Saudi society attached to women who offend, guardians generally prefer to leave women in prison for the rest of their lives. The participants' statements clearly indicated that the desire to be free from domestic oppression was so strong that their offences were intended to result in them being sent to prison. This finding clearly opposes the general view that violence by women is mainly reactive in nature (Douglass et al. 2020; Hamel and Russell 2013; Leisring 2012) and provides an insight into how institutions can become spaces of freedom for women frustrated with patriarchal practices.

Recently, the Saudi Arabia government has taken steps to loosen the restrictions the guardianship system places on women. Prominent examples include the right to drive a car, to travel without permission from a guardian, to seek employment, and to live apart from a husband (Said 2019). Although a step in a positive direction, real change will only result from a change in the societal mindset that allows practices such as guardianship to persist and continue to act as impediments for women.

Implications and Future Research

Findings from this study highlight the importance of access to women's rights organization in Saudi Arabia. A number of participants that tried to approach such organizations received little to no help, however, once the offence had been committed, they were branded as criminals and imprisoned. Having access to women's rights organization can be beneficial in ensuring support for women vulnerable to being abused and subsequently committing an offence.

Future research should also consider the impact of financial dependency on domestic violence in Saudi Arabia more thoroughly. Additionally, the Saudi government is encouraged to investigate issues in relation to the financial dependency of women on their guardians and take measures to ensure the

welfare of women who feel trapped in an abusive relationship and cannot escape due to fear of financial difficulties.

The impact of domestic violence on children in the household also requires further study in Saudi Arabia. In some cases, participants reported that they have been subjected to violence in front of their children. Consequently, participants reported that their children developed poor mental health and were unable to study. Therefore, the impact of domestic violence on the mental health and well-being of children requires extensive research, as well as effective organizations that would take necessary measures in Saudi Arabia.

Limitations

This study had some limitations. First, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the entire population, since participants comprised female perpetrators of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia. Second, participants for this study were recruited from one woman only prison in the capital city of Riyadh. The experience of women perpetrators may well be different in other parts of the Kingdoms. Including participants from more prisons in a future study could allow for a more diverse comparison between women from different parts of the country regarding the motives that drive them to resort to violence.

Lastly, this study did not interview men who were victims of violence. It was difficult to identify male victims of domestic violence due to confidentiality issues and the general reluctance of men to share their experiences of being victims of female violence. As a result, the accounts of women could not be corroborated with the experience of men. This also meant that micro-level (relationship) factors could not be explored as part of this study.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to explore the motivations behind female-perpetrated domestic violence in Saudi Arabia. Broadly speaking, participants in this study committed crimes for two main reasons, self-defense and emancipatory longing. Self-defense as a motivation for violence by women has been covered extensively in the literature. However, this study also provided evidence that violence by women can be deliberate and planned. Many participants in this study saw institutions as a place of freedom from oppressive patriarchal practices.

This study presents evidence regarding how patriarchal practices can motivate women to commit acts of violence against their guardians. It highlights the struggles that Saudi women face in such a system and how this can compound frustrations among women over time. Although substantial new changes to the guardianship system have been introduced

by the Saudi Arabia government, Saudi society in general continues to follow a narrow interpretation of Islamic law. For substantial change to occur, the societal mindset must also change; education is key in this regard.

Additionally, this study also highlights that, in Saudi Arabia, women continue to be arrested for defensive actions taken against domestic abuse and mistreatment. This is a concern that requires attention from the Saudi authorities and reflects the need for more organizations that will help female victims of domestic violence. The existence of and access to such organizations will help women who are victims of abuse and could help prevent them committing crimes.

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