

Resilient Voices: Strength, Agency, and Resistance Among Pakistani Women Survivors of Domestic Violence



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Aiman Zaheen^{1,2,3}, Aamir Jamal^{2,3}, Nida Tanweer⁴ and Seval Gok^{2,3}

Faculty of Kinesiology¹, Faculty of Social Work² and University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada³, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan⁴

Abstract

This research project addresses a gap in the literature on the strength and resilience of Pakistani women who experience domestic violence and abuse (DVA), who are often solely characterized as helpless victims. The patriarchal structure of Pakistan, places women in a vulnerable position to face violence from the surrounding male figures since childhood. Drawing on eight in-depth interviews conducted in Karachi, this article showcases coping strategies that women use. The data show the women of the global south prove to be resilient in diverse ways such as becoming advocates for violence, looking at their future with hope, and moving forward with an empowered and positive outlook toward life.

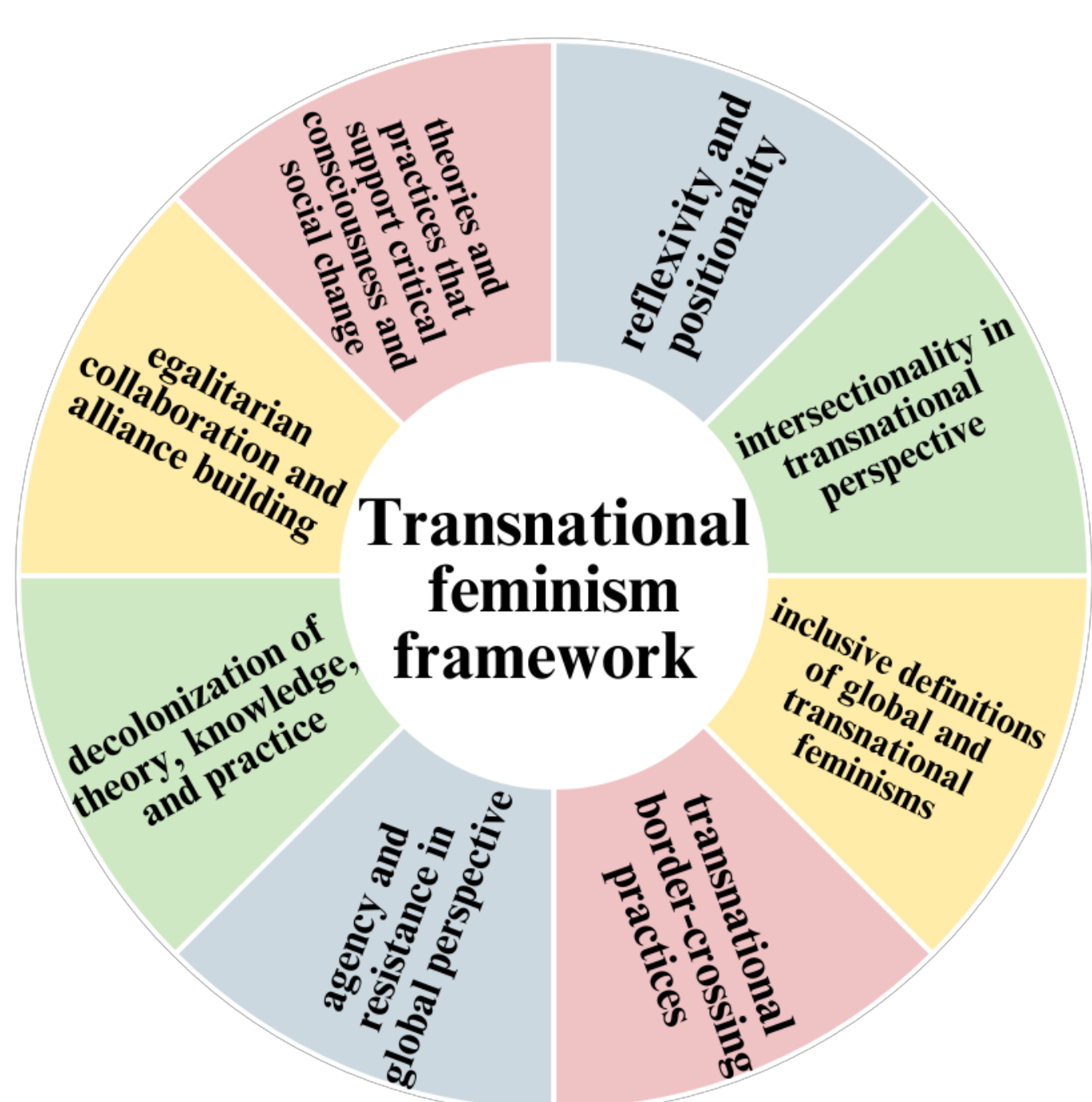
Introduction

- Pakistan was ranked as the fourth most dangerous country for women (Sarfraz et al., 2021)
- The city Karachi: high crime rates, ethnopolitical violence, turf wars, and terrorism. The origins of Karachi's conflicts can be traced to Britain's imperial conquest and its aftermath (Gayer, 2014).
- Gap in the Pakistani literature, only two studies (Zakar et al., 2012; Batool & Ahmad, 2022) discuss resilience and coping strategies of Pakistani women.
- 32% of women have experienced physical violence and 40% of ever-married women have suffered spousal abuse at some point in their life in Pakistan (UNFPA, 2017 - 2018).
- Coping is a reflection of both the person and their environment (Michael Ungar, 2013).
- Resilience is a psychological resource (Tsirigotis & Łuczak, 2018). It accounts for the personal strengths which enable survivors to navigate amidst violence.
- Our study dives deep into the untold stories of strength, resilience, and the unique coping mechanisms employed by women in Karachi's slums while debunking clichés about the "victimhood of women from conservative developing countries" (Zakar et al., 2012).

Objectives

1. Explore the narratives of domestic violence to highlight the types of violence, familial and cultural perspectives, and the views of women and Pakistani society on violence.
2. Investigate the coping strategies employed by women of low socioeconomic status in Karachi amidst domestic violence, and how these strategies build resilience for their current situation and future.

Figure 1. created from the study of Zerme Enns (2021), highlights the 8 tenets of transnational feminist theory.



- Qualitative study with in-depth **semi-structured interviews**
- An **transnational feminism** framework was employed to examine the narratives
- Eight Participants were recruited through the intermediary, **Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in Karachi**.
- Interviews were conducted in **Urdu**, transcribed verbatim, and translated to English.
- Thematic analysis using **Fraser's (2004) model**.
- The interviews were conducted in **low socioeconomic** communities such as Machar Colony, Pehlwan Basti etc.



Results

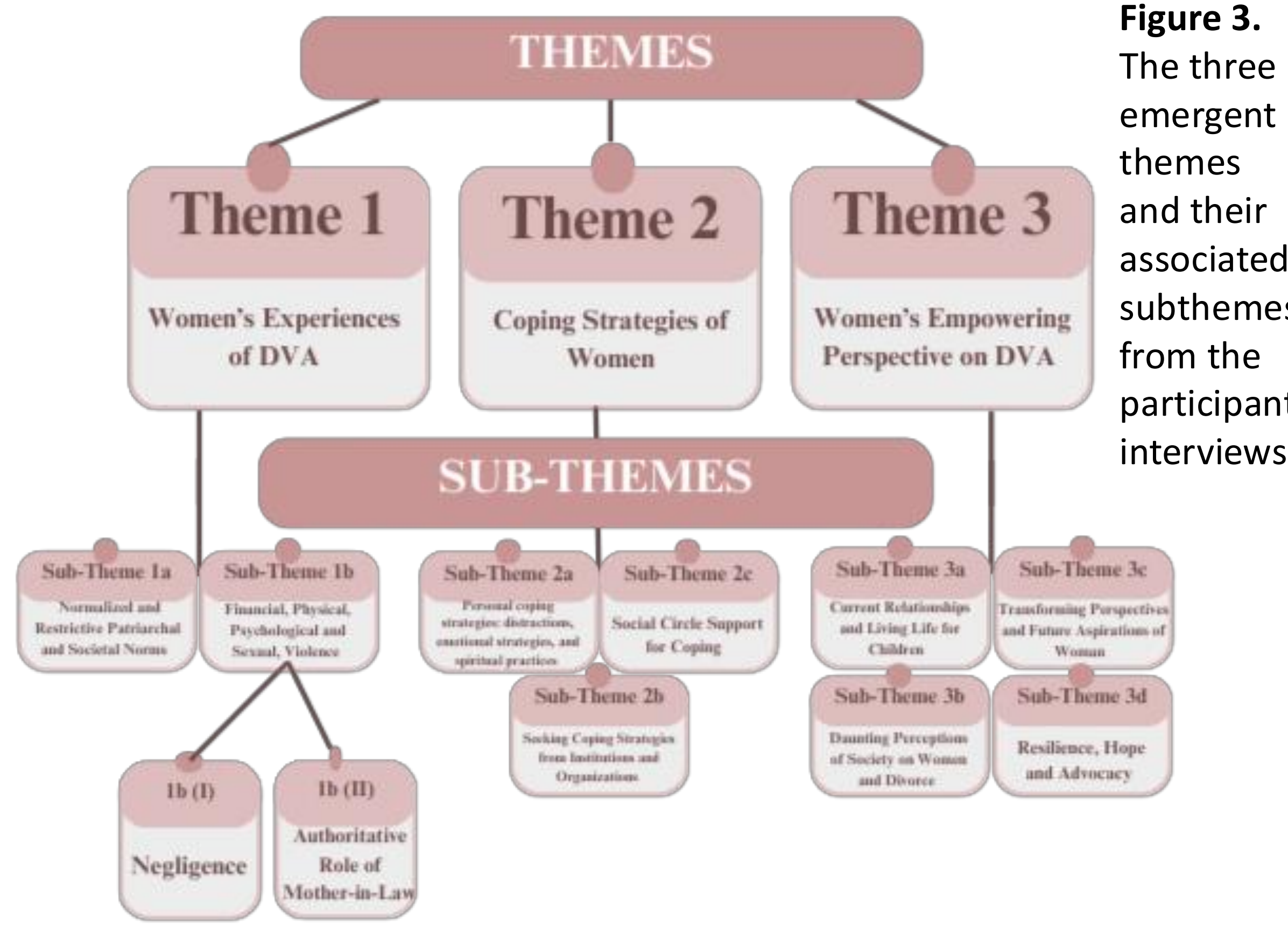


Figure 3. The three emergent themes and their associated subthemes from the participant interviews.

Personal Coping Strategies

- P1 - I did Jharro, posha (brooming and mopping), what else would I have done without food even. I used to pray.
- P2 - (...) I used to think it would get better. In this thought, I wasted 12 years of my life.
- P2 - I used to do a lot of ladies' handwork (clothing).
- P5 - I used to get involved with house chores and start cooking.
- P5 - I do stitching, and I am also a beautician.
- P8 - I did a 6-month diploma from for a beautician course

P3 - I only want to say that sitting at home, upbringing children, being uneducated, there is no such role of these things. Humans should be bold and face adversity/still circumstances. When you think that you have courage, strength, and spirit, you think that you have these, then you can win any war. (...) I just escaped a quicksand, why would I want to get stuck in another quicksand. If I was to get married again, then I would be beaten again. (...) Better than this is that I make myself strong. So a strong women can face any time of circumstance possible.

(Transforming Perspectives and Future Aspirations of Women)

P4 - I want to give this message that no one should tolerate violence like this. He will do it one day, two days, three days, and 3-4 days later he will kill you. This is what is happening with the women, so it is better to not to tolerate the violence. They should take action. My sister was quiet like this, and she was killed." (Resilience, hope and advocacy)

P7 - I have just started to live life for myself. I wear the colors my heart wishes to wear. Now that he is no longer here, I don't have to limit myself to gray, beige, and brown as he instructed me to. My neighbors used to ask, 'Why do you wear window-like colors?' He (my husband) never let me wear bright colors. However, now, I live life by my own choice. It is my choice if I wear a burqa, and it is my choice to wear a scarf. Only in this way can a women be free and live as they wish, in colorful clothes. (Resilience, hope and advocacy)

P5 - She (MIL) would insult and demean me while pushing me. (Authoritative role of mother-in-law)

Table 1. This table shows who the perpetrator of violence was for each participant.

Participant 1-8	Perpetrator of Violence
P1	Husband
P2	Husband
P3	Husband, Son, Son's In-laws, Daughter-in-law
P4	Husband, Mother-in-law
P5	Husband, Mother-in-law, Other In-laws
P6	Brother-in-law (older), Mother-in-law, Husband
P7	Husband
P8	Older brother, Younger brother, and Sister

The participants are abbreviated P1-P8 for anonymity.

Table 2. This table shows the types of violence that the participants faced.

Types of Violence	Participant 1-8
Physical Violence	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
Psychological and Emotional Violence	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
Financial Violence	P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P8
Sexual Violence	P2, P6

The participants are abbreviated P1-P8 for anonymity.

Discussion and Conclusion

- Financial dependence, gender inequality, marriage patterns, societal structures, & substance use contribute to violent behavior. (Zahid et al., 2023).
- Despite facing severe violence, women in the study show resilience and a desire to overcome their circumstances to improve their futures especially for their children.
- **Impact of DVA on women:** health consequences (chronic pain, depression, miscarriages, infertility), poor quality of life (emotional distress, lack of autonomy, fear for children's future)
- For battered women of color, **spiritual healing** and having a positive relationship with god helped restore meaning in their lives.
- The **mother-in-law** contribute to the conflicts in marriage and exacerbate abuse.
- **Empowerment & Autonomy:**
 - Women transitioned from victims to survivors to thrivers.
 - Developed a positive outlook and became advocates for other survivors.
- **Hopes for the Future**
 - Breaking the cycle of violence for their children.
 - Overcoming societal labels (e.g., divorcee) and reclaiming their identity.

Proposed Adaptation of the Thrivership Model (Heywood et al., 2019)

1. Provision of Safety:

- Safe shelters, culturally sensitive counseling, religious guidance.

2. Storytelling & Awareness:

- Community-based safe spaces, religious leaders, women-led storytelling.

3. Social Response & Policy Changes:

- Training professionals (police, healthcare workers, teachers).
- School programs on healthy relationships.
- Media campaigns
- Economic empowerment - vocational training

Future Direction

Some limitations of the study are small sample size, temporal factors, single time-point data collection, & participant bias.

- Despite exposure, **Pakistani women do not accept violence passively.**
- Orgs like **HRCP** are vital for educating and supporting women
- Research should go **beyond Western perspectives** and consider global, diverse women's experiences.
- **Transnational feminist approach** is needed for comprehensive understanding and solutions.
- More studies are needed on **Islamic feminism** and **men's engagement in violence against women.**

Acknowledgements

The researcher gratefully acknowledges Alberta Innovates for their Summer Studentship Award, awarded through the PURE application in 2022. This grant made this international domestic violence research possible.



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan