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## Analyzing the Effectiveness of Dar-ul Aman as Shelter Homes for Survivors of Violence Against Women

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### Abstract

In Pakistan, the provincial governments have established shelter homes for women who are suffering from various forms of violence against women. These homes are called Dar-ul-Aman. In Punjab, Dar-ul-Aman has been established at district level. At each Dar-ul-Aman, the government provides shelter and other facilities. Firstly, this qualitative study aimed to understand the lived experiences of women living in these homes. Secondly, this study aimed to identify the key challenges that need to be addressed to enhance the effectiveness of these homes. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The researchers did in-depth interviews of sixteen women who were residing in Dar-ul-Aman of Lahore. A focused group discussion was conducted with the officials of Dar-ul-Aman. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study concluded that women sought shelter in Dar-ul-Aman due to domestic abuse and violence, marital disputes, and financial vulnerabilities. Women who were staying at Dar-ul-Aman reported their concerns related to the procedures and mechanisms of this institution. There is a dire need to enhance the effectiveness of Dar-ul-Aman. Thus, institutional reforms are necessary to make this service more effective for vulnerable women seeking refuge through this platform.

**Keywords:** Dar-ul-Aman, Shelter Homes, Institutional Refuge, Violence Against Women, Protection.



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## **1. Introduction**

Survivors of violence against women worldwide encounter challenges that impact their safety, economic prospects, and overall well-being. These challenges are more intensified by patriarchal norms in developing societies. This perpetuates cycles of marginalization and vulnerability (UNDP, 2020). Women's shelter homes have the potential to transform the lives of survivors of violence against women by providing a safe haven to escape domestic violence, abuse, and various forms of gender-based oppression. Women's shelters offer immediate physical safety and enable access to psychological counseling, legal assistance, and vocational training. These homes enhance agency and autonomy by meeting the immediate and long-term needs of survivors. Consequently, these shelter homes are essential to wider initiatives aimed at advancing gender equity and social justice within patriarchal frameworks (Etienne, 2022).

Women's shelter homes were established in the 20th century to address domestic abuse and violence against women (Dobash & Dobash, 2003). During that period, women's rights advocates and religious groups operated these residences. These homes offered shelter to women fleeing domestic violence and abuse (Schechter, 1982). The earliest women's shelter was established in the United Kingdom in the 1970s under the second wave of feminism. At the start of the 21st century, shelter homes have expanded globally. Shelter homes have been established by governments and non-governmental organizations as a means of providing a safe haven for individuals who have survived an experience of gender-based violence. An increasing international commitment to gender equity and social justice is reflected in the fact that these shelters now function as safe spaces as well as centers for empowerment and healing (UN Women, 2011).

Several European countries began providing shelters for women after 1950. Shelter services have been integrated into social assistance programs in the UK (Wikström & Ghazinour, 2013), Sweden (Forthmeijer & Ekström, 2024), and Denmark (Dokkedahl et al., 2021). This service provides women and children with legal protection, housing assistance, and rehabilitation programs, according to the United Nations Women's Organization (2011). Women and children who have survived violence against them have the opportunity to finish their education and acquire job skills in shelter homes, which can help them recover and empower them in the long run (Baker et al., 2010). Similar efforts are needed at the global level to eradicate gender-based violence (Heise, 1998).

India has started the Swadhar Greh and One-Stop Centre initiatives to offer shelter to women enduring domestic violence. To the victims of abuse against women, Swadhar Greh offers rehabilitative programs, legal assistance, and temporary housing. Reports indicate that these centres are packed. Many shelters lack psychological care and the living circumstances are really bad (Olson, Garcia-Moreno & Colombini, 2020). Bangladesh's government has set up One-Stop Crisis Centres as well. Women who have suffered assault or trauma get shelter, legal help, medical care, and psychological support at these institutions. These centres are run by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) in Bangladesh. They are meant to fulfill the urgent demands of survivors and assist rehabilitation and recovery (Bairagi et al., 2006).

### **1.1. Situation in Pakistan**

Pakistan is a welfare state. The government of Pakistan is committed to maintaining the basic values of a welfare state. Many social safety net initiatives have been put into place at the national and provincial levels to assist underprivileged groups, especially women; therefore, they are helping to accomplish this goal. These initiatives help guarantee social justice, equity, and the

safeguarding of human rights for underprivileged people. The Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), started in 2008, is one such initiative.

The government has established shelter homes (Dar-ul-Aman) for women in all provinces of Pakistan (Tarar et al., 2021). The first Dar-ul-Aman was established in 1963 in the Punjab. In the coming years, seven more shelter homes were established in Punjab. As of 2006, there were fifteen Dar-ul-Aman across four provinces in Pakistan, with eight located in Punjab (Eshraghi, 2006). Currently, 36 shelter homes are operational in Punjab to provide refuge to women victims of violence. These homes can accommodate 20 to 50 residents (Social Welfare and Bait ul Mal Department, 2024). The main objectives and focus behind the establishment of Dar-ul-Aman (Shelter Homes) are as follows: to offer assistance to women and girls in need of immediate refuge, boarding, and lodging; to help vulnerable women gain access to justice; to provide rehabilitation programs for psychological, social, and economic empowerment; to support women in distress through reconciliation and negotiation with their families; and to provide an environment where women can make decisions about their future and determine the proper course of action to secure their interests (Ishfaq, Malik & Hussain, 2018). Refuge-seeking or induction procedure of Dar-ul-Aman: Women can be referred by courts/judges, authorities, social welfare agencies (NGOs/CBOs), government and semi-government projects or institutions, or can approach themselves (Social Welfare and Bait ul Mal Department, 2024).

The establishment of Dar-ul-Aman at the district level demonstrates the government's dedication to meeting the needs of vulnerable women. These homes primarily provide shelter and assistance to women who have encountered domestic violence, sexual abuse, abandonment, or threats to their safety. Women who experience honour crimes, forced marriages, or are escaping abusive situations are eligible for the services offered by Dar-ul-Aman. Shelter homes seek to safeguard women and support their rehabilitation through the provision of legal assistance, counselling, and skills training (Ashraf, Abrar-ul-Haq, & Ashraf, 2017). Dar-ul-Aman serves a significant function in Pakistan by providing essential support and refuge to women who have experienced various forms of violence and abuse. These shelters offer physical protection and essential services, including legal aid, psychological counselling, and vocational training, aimed at empowering women to restore their lives (National Commission for Human Rights of Pakistan [NCHR], 2023).

## **2. Literature Review**

Women's empowerment cannot be achieved without having an inclusive society. Therefore, there is a need to provide them necessary resources, opportunities, and support for their active participation in all aspects of life. This can lead to better socio-economic conditions and political environment which is a prerequisite for sustainable development (Razzaq and Mehmood, 2022). However, patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched in Pakistani society and Pakistani women face numerous challenges. These norms not only restrict women's freedom but also contribute to their vulnerability to domestic violence and abuse (Ishfaq et al., 2018). According to Connell (2005), traditional gender roles is one of the major factors that contribute to the normalization and justification of violence against women by maintaining male dominance and female submission.

According to Article 25 of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Constitution, every person is entitled to security and equal rights. This seems not true for Pakistani women as they are continuously facing challenges and discrimination. Noreen and Musarrat (2014) highlighted the persistent struggle for legal empowerment and the need for more systemic reforms to ensure that women can fully exercise their rights. In the context of Pakistan's male-dominated society, women frequently find themselves subjected to strict traditions, familial and kinship dynamics, and a pervasive notion

that family honour is intrinsically linked to women's chastity, virginity, and purity. Cultural expectations can pose considerable obstacles for women, constraining their autonomy and ability to make decisions. Article 25 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan states that every individual is entitled to security and equal rights. Nonetheless, factors like inadequate financial resources, coerced unions, lack of educational opportunities, discriminatory actions from parents, and multiple types of violence impact women on physical, social, and emotional levels, frequently leading them to find safety in Dar-ul-Aman shelters.

Rasheed, Tahir, and Zulfiqar (2022) highlighted the significance of socio-cultural factors affecting their decision to flee abusive or oppressive home environments in Punjab, Pakistan. The girls and women leave home to escape unavoidable situations. These girls often flee due to conflicts with their families. In addition, they are forced to accept the decisions that are impacting their lives, e.g., forced marriages. They also become the victims of physical violence if they do not accept rigid socio-cultural norms. Dar-ul-Aman shelters offer a safe haven for women and girls victimized by oppressive familial circumstances. (Majeed, 2016).

Familial issues leading to institutional refuge are varied and complex, affecting daily life in numerous ways. Common problems include domestic violence, proximity to relatives, poor communication, work-life balance, disagreements on parenting, dispute management, and child-parent abuse. These problems often lead to conflicts, a normal part of family life. Additionally, everyday challenges like school issues, work losses, abuse, disabilities, and illnesses also impact families. Crespi and Sabatelli (1993) discussed how these issues lead to adolescent runaways and family strife, contributing to the need for institutional refuge. Patel (2010) revealed that Pakistan offers a few shelters that can safeguard women who have been victims of violence by providing a safe haven and assistance during crises. These shelters are primarily located in metropolitan cities such as Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar, and vulnerable women are sent there by the courts to be kept in protective custody. However, the Pakistani government is unable to administer these shelters efficiently and fails to offer the necessary conditions for women victims of assault.

Hashmi (2009) revealed that although the government has established Dar-ul-Aman in each district of Punjab, there is continuous criticism about their performance, as these institutions are neither providing shelter nor functioning as homes for disadvantaged women. According to Tarar, Ranjha, and Almas (2021) in their study *Women Welfare Services in Shelters: A Study of the Punjab's Dar-ul-Aman*, based on surveys conducted by Médecins du Monde (2009) and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2007), women residing in Dar-ul-Aman shelters in Faisalabad, Gujranwala, and Lahore faced significant challenges. In Faisalabad Dar-ul-Aman, 65% of women were unaware of the expected duration of their stay, leading to stress. This percentage was 83% in Gujranwala, and in Lahore, it was 63%. The total duration of stay varied between three weeks up to six months, or even up to one year, with some women staying longer. In exceptional cases, Dar-ul-Amans provided long-term stays for residents without family or relatives, and the shelter administration arranged their marriages.

Additionally, a staggering 86% of residents were victims of physical violence. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's 2007 survey revealed that existing shelter homes were inadequately equipped, understaffed, and incapable of providing necessary interventions. The absence of trained staff and limited funding affect the availability of essential services, i.e., psychological counseling, free legal assistance, and medical aid, which are prerequisites for this institution (Médecins du Monde, 2009; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2007).

### **3. Research Methodology**

This research study was conducted using qualitative research design. The data were collected through focused group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. The researchers did in-depth interviews with 16 women who were staying at Dar-ul-Aman, Lahore. These women were selected based on length of stay, age, and reasons for seeking shelter. Multiple narratives were gathered due to this selection criterion. The researchers carried out FGDS with the officials of Dar-ul-Aman. They were superintendent, psychologist, female doctor, supervisor, and religious instructor. The purpose of the FGDs was to understand the daily operations of Dar-ul-Aman. They were asked to explain key challenges that are hindering the functionality of these homes. Before doing in-depth interviews and FGDs, the researchers informed every participant about their rights. Informed consent was taken from each participant. It was ensured that participants' privacy and anonymity throughout the data collection process. The researchers did a thematic analysis to examine the data. This analytical method helped to identify the key issues influencing the women's experiences and assess the effectiveness of Dar-ul-Aman.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. Most (87.5%) of the women were between the ages of 18 and 34. Eighty-one percent of them had married status. The majority of respondents were from Lahore (43.75%), followed by Okara and Faisalabad. Nine women resided for less than one month, and six women stayed for 1–3 months.

**Table 1:** *Socio-demographic and social characteristics of the respondents*

| Variable                        | Category            | Frequency (N) | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------|
| <b>Age Distribution</b>         | 18–24 years         | 7             | 43.75      |
|                                 | 25–34 years         | 7             | 43.75      |
|                                 | 35–44 years         | 2             | 12.50      |
| <b>Marital Status</b>           | Single              | 2             | 12.50      |
|                                 | Married             | 13            | 81.25      |
|                                 | Divorced            | 1             | 6.25       |
| <b>Literacy Rate</b>            | Illiterate          | 10            | 62.50      |
|                                 | Primary Education   | 3             | 18.75      |
|                                 | Secondary Education | 3             | 18.75      |
| <b>Geographic Origins</b>       | Lahore              | 7             | 43.75      |
|                                 | Okara               | 3             | 18.75      |
|                                 | Faisalabad          | 3             | 18.75      |
|                                 | Kasur               | 1             | 6.25       |
|                                 | Chiniot             | 1             | 6.25       |
|                                 | Bahawal Nagar       | 1             | 6.25       |
| <b>Duration of Stay</b>         | Less than 1 month   | 9             | 56.25      |
|                                 | 1–3 months          | 6             | 37.50      |
|                                 | 4–6 months          | 0             | 0.00       |
|                                 | More than 6 months  | 1             | 6.25       |
| <b>Total No. of Respondents</b> |                     | 16            | 100%       |

### 4.2. Forms of Violence

#### 4.2.1. Physical Violence

Four respondents indicated experiencing severe physical assaults by their husbands or in-laws, highlighting the prevalence of physical violence in their daily lives. One respondent said, "My mother-in-law and sister-in-law, who allege that I neglect my five children and fail to be submissive, have perpetuated ongoing conflict." Their actions seem aimed at undermining my relationship with my husband due to concerns that I might acquire influence over family finances and our household.

An official from Dar-ul-Aman stated, "These cases illustrate entrenched problems of domestic violence and gender-based abuse within our society." Such situations frequently encompass both physical violence and psychological manipulation, particularly by family members, including in-laws, with the intent to undermine marital relationships and assert control. In such cases, women fear of losing their financial independence or household autonomy intensifies the conflicts. Consequently, they choose to seek refuge and save their lives.

#### **4.2.2. Psychological Violence**

In this study, two cases were reported where victims were suffered from psychological violence. They were bullied and discriminated. The perpetrators were immediate family members. Consequently, they endured psychological trauma. They were denied to basic needs i.e., access to food, education, and healthcare. One respondent quoted, "My husband physically assaults me and insists that I vacate his residence, denying financial support for my essential needs. I oversee my finances through agricultural employment. He fractured my knee, rendering me incapacitated for three to four months. In a moment of anger, I departed the residence, although I now profoundly regret my choice". The second respondent said, "My in-laws inflicted severe abuse upon me, and although my husband did not initially partake, he became abusive under their influence. I am wrongfully accused of actions I did not perpetrate, while my sister-in-law appropriates goods from my room and falsely alleges theft against me. I was subjected to tremendous abuse, prompting my decision to resign".

The Dar-ul-Aman official acknowledged the profound effects of psychological violence, encompassing mental harassment, manipulation, and prejudice, on the emotional and psychological health of victims. "Close relatives frequently commit such abuse, undermining an individual's self-esteem and inflicting enduring psychological trauma. We are committed to provide extensive support, including secure accommodation, psychiatric treatment, and legal aid. In these instances, we guarantee that victims have the necessary resources and assistance to recuperate from trauma and initiate their path toward a nurturing environment".

#### **4.2.3. Sexual Violence**

Two respondents indicated experiencing violations: one reported abuse by her stepfather, while the other cited her brother-in-law as the perpetrator. These cases highlight the severe consequences of sexual violence in domestic environments and the intricate challenges associated with addressing abuse within familial frameworks. Sexual violence constitutes a major global concern, resulting in profound physical and emotional repercussions for victims (Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). One respondent reported experiencing mental and sexual violence. "My brother-in-law, who is my husband's elder brother, has subjected me to sexual harassment, molestation, and humiliation on multiple occasions. I expressed my dissatisfaction to my husband regarding his inappropriate behavior and requested to live apart. However, he disregarded my concerns and assumed I would accommodate his demands without question. In these unavoidable circumstances, I expressed my concerns to my parents; however, they did not take any action. I decided to leave home and seek refuge at Dar-ul-Aman".

The official from Dar-ul-Aman remarked that the impact of sexual violence is particularly severe when it occurs within familial relationships, as it involves a violation of bodily autonomy and dignity, further exacerbated by a breach of trust. Such abuse, encompassing non-consensual acts within the domestic sphere, can result in enduring emotional and psychological trauma. "Dar-ul-Aman is dedicated to providing survivors with a secure, confidential, and supportive environment that facilitates their empowerment and pursuit of justice. In such cases, we ensure that survivors

access essential resources and support to facilitate healing, restore dignity, and progress in a safe environment, devoid of further harm”.

#### **4.3. Socio-economic Vulnerability**

One woman articulated that her absence of economic independence impeded her ability to exit an abusive relationship, whereas another encountered economic exploitation by an abuser who dominated her finances, rendering her incapable of supporting herself and her children. A distressing case involved a woman who, after a family member's rape, was coerced into prostitution by her mother. This underscores the prevalence of sexual violence and the exploitation of women for financial gain, an alarming issue that requires attention at both societal and legislative levels (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996).

One respondent reported, “My husband has physically abused me and demanded that I leave our home.” He does not provide financial support for my basic needs; therefore, I manage my finances through agricultural work. He fractured my knee, rendering me incapacitated for a duration of three to four months. In a moment of anger, I chose to leave him; however, I now regret that decision. Another respondent stated: “My stepfather abuses me repeatedly; this is the most traumatic aspect of my life, as I have been raped by him without my consent. My biological mother condones his actions and often leaves me alone with her husband, who physically and sexually assaults me.” She subsequently begins to attract customers and coerces me into prostitution. Due to the humiliating behavior of my parents, I leave home and seek refuge in Dar-ul-Aman.

The Dar-ul-Aman official stated that socio-economic vulnerability significantly contributes to the continuation of abuse, particularly when women lack financial independence or are dominated by their abusers. Financial dependence confines individuals in abusive relationships, frequently resulting in significant exploitation. Instances of coerced prostitution and familial sexual abuse illustrate the exacerbating effect of economic control on trauma. Targeted interventions, including counseling, financial empowerment, and legal support, are crucial for assisting survivors in regaining independence and dignity, enabling them to reconstruct their lives free from abuse and exploitation.

#### **4.4. Emotional exploitation**

Emotional factors indicate individual choices and decisions related to love and marriage, which frequently clash with conventional family or societal expectations (Fatima, 2019). Three married women with children sought refuge due to emotional attachments to individuals outside their marital or familial relationships. Women involved in extramarital affairs often encounter significant threats to their lives from husbands, in-laws, or parents, motivated by concerns of honor and societal disapproval. One respondent stated, “I am compelled to marry an older man despite my love for my cousin.” My husband, who experiences addiction issues, subjects me to abuse and makes unfounded accusations of infidelity. His physical assault during my pregnancy resulted in two miscarriages. I am currently pursuing separation (Khula) with assistance from my former partner and am seeking legal aid and protection at Dar-ul-Aman.

Another respondent indicated, “I develop a profound emotional attachment to an educated yet unemployed man.” Upon my parents' rejection of his proposal and their intention to arrange my marriage to another, I depart from home to marry him. He betrays me by taking me to Dar-ul-Aman and subsequently disappears, severing all communication. I now regret my decision and fear returning home because of my parents' anger, societal pressure, and threats to my life. Consequently, I seek refuge at Dar-ul-Aman.

An official from Dar-ul-Aman remarked that emotional factors, including attachments to individuals beyond marital or familial ties, may result in considerable distress and potential danger



for women, particularly when these attachments clash with societal or familial norms. He said, “These cases frequently illustrate a complex interplay of affection, treachery, and the pursuit of autonomy, potentially leading to life-threatening outcomes. The emotional turmoil experienced by these women is exacerbated by pressures associated with family honor, societal disapproval, and threats of violence from individuals in their immediate circles. The emotional distress associated with making challenging decisions regarding love or personal happiness is acknowledged, especially when such choices result in physical or emotional harm. We aim to create a secure environment for women encountering emotional challenges, providing protection, legal assistance, and counseling to help them regain their autonomy”.

#### **4.5. Challenges for Dar-ul-Aman**

This study highlighted some key issues related to the management of Dar-ul-Aman. There were limited funds available to run this institution. There was a need to hire more staff for managing day-to-day affairs. It was also reported that shelter homes and transitional homes were overcrowded. Resident women also faced troubles in accessing legal teams for legal aid. However, Dar-ul-Aman provided them free legal aid, with a focus on empowering women through vocational training and education. In some cases, their cases got prolonged due to systematic delays that badly affected their lives. Furthermore, the residents' mental health issues stemmed from the trauma they experienced. Additionally, they experienced physical health issues. Shelter homes, however, only offer basic health care services. Although Dar-ul-Aman provides shelter, security, and legal aid to the victims of violence against women, these shelter homes did not have any reintegration mechanism for the residents to make them active and productive citizens of the state.

### **5. Conclusion**

The paper discussed the experiences of women who sought refuge in Dar-ul-Aman. They escaped domestic violence in the form of physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Furthermore, interpersonal conflicts, financial insecurity, and marital disputes were the other main causes driving them to go for refuge in Dar-ul-Aman. By the time they arrived, they were experiencing economic dependence, psychological trauma, and health changes. Breaking the cycle of dependence is thus crucial for their recovery and independence. To end this cycle, tailored educational and vocational training programs for survivors of violence against women are much needed. Such initiatives will improve their literacy and skills and make them able to become economically independent.

This study advocates for improving psychological support systems in the Dar-ul-Aman. This will help the survivors to cope with mental and emotional strain. The provision of adequate healthcare services, particularly maternal care; developing a referral system for severe psychiatric illnesses; and access to qualified therapists, are recommended. In addition, there is a need to accelerate the court cases of women living in Dar-ul-Aman. Furthermore, resolving systemic delays and bureaucratic obstacles will facilitate more timely access to justice for women. In conclusion, it is essential to address the systemic and socio-economic constraints identified in this study to empower women. By adopting the proposed solutions, Dar-ul-Aman shelters can enhance their efficacy in safeguarding, rehabilitating, and assisting women in their pursuit of independence and improved quality of life.

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