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A MIXED METHOD STUDY ON AWARENESS OF VAWC AND SHARI'AH LAWS AND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN SULU

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against Women and their Children (VAWC) remains one of the most persistent human rights concerns across the globe. It damages the dignity, security, and health of countless women and children. Although legal instruments have been developed at both international and national levels, the enforcement of these laws in certain localities, particularly those characterized by religious and cultural diversity, remains inconsistent. For this reason, this study examines this challenge within the context of Sulu, where both Philippine Civil Law (Republic Act No. 9262) and Shari'ah Law (Presidential Decree No. 1083) coexist. It explores the awareness of women regarding these laws, their lived experiences of violence, and the social and institutional barriers that influence their pursuit of justice.

Globally, initiatives such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women stress state responsibility in protecting women. However, cultural and religious practices often impede these efforts. In dual legal systems, like those in Muslim-majority contexts, conflicting interpretations between civil and religious law can create uncertainty for women seeking protection (UN Women, 2021). Similarly, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have noted that in Muslim communities, enforcement is often weakened by local customs and patriarchal interpretations of justice.

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 9262, or the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004, provides comprehensive protection from physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse. Yet, data from the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) and Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) reveal continuing underreporting and uneven implementation, particularly in Muslim-majority areas. The 2017 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) further shows that many victims do not seek legal help. Moreover, studies addressing Presidential Decree 1083 (PD 1083), which defines women's rights and family relations under Shari'ah law, remain limited, leaving significant gaps in understanding the intersections between these laws.

Locally, Jolo in Sulu represents a unique legal environment where Shari'ah and civil law operate simultaneously. Despite these frameworks, many women lack adequate awareness of VAWC laws and their rights. Patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and adherence to traditional mediation mechanisms such as Taritib (community protocol) and Ibed (informal mediation) influence women's responses to abuse. The Bangsamoro Human Rights Commission (BHRC) identified that cultural silence, weak law enforcement, and limited knowledge contribute to women's continued vulnerability.

Given this context, the study aims to assess the awareness of women in Jolo, Sulu regarding VAWC laws under both RA 9262 and PD 1083, explore their lived experiences of violence, and identify challenges they face when navigating the legal system. It further seeks to propose culturally sensitive programs to address these gaps.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign Literature

Research across Muslim contexts reveals that violence against women remains intertwined with religion, tradition, and access to justice. Yusoff et al. (2022) identified economic neglect as a pervasive but underrecognized form of abuse, arguing that failure to provide nafaqah (financial support) constitutes violence under Shari'ah. They suggested Islamic Financial Institutions (IFIs) could be essential in restoring women's independence through microfinance and education.

Azmi et al. (2024) explored darar emosi (emotional abuse) in Malaysia, showing that humiliation and psychological neglect are legitimate grounds for marital annulment (fasakh), but the burden of proof prevents most women from seeking relief. Similarly, Afriyanti et al. (2023) analyzed Islamic criminal law (jināyah) and found that inconsistent judicial interpretations often minimize emotional and psychological harm.

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In Indonesia, Sukendar et al. (2023) examined religious court mediation, noting that while mediation is preferred for its speed and privacy, it can pressure victims into reconciliation rather than justice. Mansuri (2024), studying India, revealed that Muslim women continue to face discrimination both within the judicial system and broader society, as patriarchal and Islamophobic attitudes intersect.

In Pakistan, Rafiq et al. (2025) highlighted weak institutional support despite the passage of domestic violence legislation. Many survivors encounter shame, fear, and family coercion not to report abuse. Meanwhile, Hamdani and Ahmad (2024) documented how community-based organizations in Brunei provide safe spaces such as "story circles," helping survivors heal collectively while preserving Islamic values of compassion and dignity.

In Western Muslim diaspora communities, Rabaan and Dombrowski (2023) proposed the Survivor-Centered Transformative Justice (SCTJ) model, emphasizing community accountability rooted in Islamic ethics. Conversely, reports from the United Kingdom (2024) criticized informal Shari'ah councils for trapping women in abusive marriages by imposing unfair divorce conditions. Positive reform was seen in Kuwait, where the 2020 Domestic Violence Protection Law integrated Islamic principles with state enforcement to protect survivors.

Finally, these studies show that while Shari'ah can uphold justice for women, institutional gaps and patriarchal biases limit its effectiveness.

Local Literature

In the Philippine context, the Anti-VAWC Act (RA 9262) stands as a cornerstone of gender protection, but local realities reveal persistent weaknesses in awareness and enforcement. Gonzalez et al. (2022) found that women in Surigao City understood physical violence but were less familiar with psychological and economic abuse. Caban (2022) observed that women in Apayao rely on informal, often inaccurate, sources of information, leading to misconceptions about their legal rights.

Meanwhile, De Guzman (2023) documented institutional barriers in Oriental Mindoro, where police and barangay officials displayed inconsistent knowledge of RA 9262, causing delays and secondary victimization. Meanwhile, Dihayco-Garciano et al. (2023) found limited understanding of VAWC laws among criminology students, future enforcers, revealing systemic issues in gender-sensitivity education.

In Muslim-majority areas, cultural tension complicates enforcement. The Philippine Commission on Women (2024) and Tan (2024) observed that victims often hesitate to report violence due to uncertainty about whether civil or Shari'ah courts apply. Studies by Mendoza (2022) and Macarandang (2021) emphasized jurisdictional confusion between RA 9262 and PD 1083, leading to "legal vertigo" among Muslim women. Sali and Usman (2023) and Alonto (2025) added that cultural norms prioritizing family harmony perpetuate silence among women in Sulu and Marawi.

Moreover, local research echoes global findings: while laws exist, awareness and cultural sensitivity remain lacking. Legal pluralism, the coexistence of RA 9262 and PD 1083, can both broaden and blur women's access to justice.

Synthesis of Literature and Studies

Both foreign and Philippine literature reveal parallel challenges: patriarchal norms, limited awareness, institutional gaps, and fragmented legal systems. Studies across contexts (Yusoff et al., 2022; Azmi et al., 2024; Tan, 2024; Mendoza, 2022) emphasize that legal frameworks alone are insufficient without culturally rooted education and enforcement. These insights justify the need for research focused on Muslim women in Sulu, whose experiences lie at the intersection of gender, religion, and law.

Methodology

This study employed an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method Design, integrating quantitative and qualitative phases. The approach was ideal for examining both measurable awareness and personal experiences of violence among women in Jolo, Sulu.

Research Design and Method

The quantitative phase utilized a self-constructed questionnaire designed to assess awareness of RA 9262 and PD 1083 across four dimensions: physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence. The qualitative phase followed through in-depth interviews with selected respondents to elaborate on the numerical trends and uncover lived experiences behind the statistics.

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Population and Sampling
The quantitative phase involved 200 women aged 15 and above residing in Jolo, Sulu. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling and met inclusion criteria such as prior or current relationship status and voluntary consent. The qualitative phase involved seven women who had personally experienced violence. Their narratives provided nuanced insights into the challenges and coping mechanisms within Sulu's dual legal context.

Locale of the Study
Jolo, Sulu, a predominantly Muslim municipality, served as the study site. The area's adherence to both civil and Shari'ah laws made it a key location for exploring legal pluralism and gender-based violence. Persistent insecurity, patriarchal values, and limited institutional support characterized the region.

Data Gathering Tools and Procedures
The survey questionnaire contained closed-ended questions measured on a four-point Likert scale. For the qualitative component, a semi-structured interview guide allowed participants to describe their experiences freely. Data collection prioritized confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, and informed consent. Quantitative data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) process.

Treatment of Data
Mean scores determined respondents' awareness levels (3.26–4.00: High; 2.51–3.25: Moderate; 1.76–2.50: Low; 1.00–1.75: Very Low). Thematic analysis extracted recurring patterns, including experiences of bodily harm, betrayal, economic neglect, and silence.

Ethical Considerations
Ethical integrity was ensured through voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and respect for local customs. Participants were referred to local support services when necessary, and all procedures were reviewed by an ethics committee.

RESULTS
The study aimed to determine the level of awareness of women in Sulu regarding the laws protecting them under Republic Act No. 9262 (Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004) and Presidential Decree No. 1083 (Code of Muslim Personal Laws). It also explored their lived experiences of violence and the challenges they face in seeking justice within a context governed by both civil and Shari'ah systems.

Awareness of RA 9262
Results showed that women in Sulu demonstrated a moderate level of awareness of RA 9262. They were generally familiar with acts of physical and sexual violence as punishable under the law, reflected by the slightly higher mean scores in these categories. Respondents recognized that being hit, slapped, coerced into sex, or physically harmed by a partner constituted violations. However, awareness declined in psychological and economic aspects, where many were uncertain that humiliation, verbal abuse, emotional neglect, and financial deprivation were also punishable. Knowledge of protection orders, reporting mechanisms, and institutional procedures was limited, revealing that understanding remained surface-level and primarily focused on visible acts of violence.

Awareness of PD 1083
Awareness of the Shari'ah-based legal framework under Presidential Decree 1083 was likewise moderate but with slightly higher means for economic provisions. Respondents identified nafaqah or financial maintenance as a husband's responsibility and associated economic neglect with Islamic law. However, they were less aware that PD 1083 also addresses physical and emotional abuse. Many participants perceived Shari'ah law as limited to marriage, divorce, and inheritance, not as a mechanism for protection against violence. Some respondents expressed confusion about whether to seek help from barangay officials, the police, or religious authorities, demonstrating the complexity of navigating overlapping legal systems.

Lived Experiences of Violence
Qualitative findings revealed that women experienced multiple forms of violence, expressed through six dominant themes: bodily harm, betrayal, economic neglect, silence, shame, and prioritizing children's welfare.

Bodily Harm. Respondents narrated incidents of physical aggression such as hitting, slapping, and confinement. These acts often occurred repeatedly and were justified by partners as forms of discipline or control. The pain and injury they endured were often accepted as part of marital life, particularly among those dependent on their husbands financially.

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Betrayal. Emotional and psychological wounds were intensified by betrayal, including infidelity and broken trust. Several respondents described feeling emotionally abandoned, insulted, or replaced. This theme highlighted how emotional betrayal, though not always visible, had profound effects on women's mental well-being and self-worth.

Economic Neglect. Many women recounted being denied financial support, with husbands refusing to provide for household or children's needs. This deprivation was not only material but symbolic, reflecting loss of respect and authority within the family. Women often endured this in silence, perceiving it as a private matter rather than a legal offense.

Silence. Cultural norms deeply influenced women's responses. Silence emerged as a coping strategy, shaped by the belief that speaking out against a husband could destroy family honor. Many admitted enduring years of abuse without disclosure, constrained by fear of judgment and social exclusion.

Shame. Related to silence, shame served as both a deterrent and a burden. Participants described feeling embarrassed to admit abuse, especially in small communities where privacy was difficult to maintain. The stigma surrounding women who reported violence reinforced their decision to stay quiet or resolve issues privately.

Prioritizing Children's Welfare. A recurring reason for endurance was concern for children. Women believed that leaving or confronting abusive partners might harm their children emotionally or socially. They equated self-sacrifice with good motherhood, demonstrating how maternal identity reinforces tolerance of abuse.

Challenges Encountered

Across both laws, four major challenges emerged: cultural barriers, institutional limitations, legal confusion, and economic dependence. Deep-rooted patriarchal values normalized male dominance and discouraged women from asserting rights. Institutional gaps, including inconsistent enforcement and limited trained personnel, weakened protection. Legal pluralism created uncertainty about jurisdiction and appropriate recourse. Economic dependence further limited women's ability to leave abusive situations, forcing reliance on informal mediation through barangay or religious leaders, where reconciliation was often prioritized over justice.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed a consistent pattern of moderate awareness among women in Sulu regarding the Violence Against Women and their Children (VAWC) laws under Republic Act No. 9262 and Presidential Decree No. 1083. Although the respondents demonstrated familiarity with physical and sexual violence, their understanding of psychological, emotional, and economic abuse remained limited. This finding was consistent with Gonzalez et al. (2022), who reported that women often associated violence only with visible or physical acts, neglecting less tangible forms such as intimidation and emotional neglect. Caban (2022) also found that misinformation about women's rights contributed to uncertainty and fear in reporting violence, which mirrored the experiences of participants in this study.

Additionally, women's partial understanding of the law reflected broader systemic issues in how information about VAWC was disseminated at the community level. While the study area was covered by both civil and Shari'ah legal systems, participants were often unaware of their distinctions or points of overlap. This confirmed the observations of Mendoza (2022), who noted that the coexistence of RA 9262 and PD 1083 created confusion regarding jurisdiction and procedures. In the present study, respondents described uncertainty over whether to seek help from barangay officials, the police, or religious authorities, demonstrating how legal pluralism could blur rather than clarify access to justice. Tan (2024) further explained that this ambiguity frequently discouraged women from reporting abuse, as many feared violating cultural expectations or undermining family honor.

Furthermore, coexistence of civil and Shari'ah systems thus created both opportunities and barriers. On one hand, RA 9262 offered explicit legal protection against physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. On the other, PD 1083 emphasized family unity and reconciliation, which could unintentionally reinforce tolerance toward abuse. This tension reflected the reality of legal pluralism, where overlapping frameworks expanded women's legal options but simultaneously produced confusion and hesitation. As noted by Sali and Usman (2023), Muslim women in Sulu often prioritized community harmony and family preservation, leading them to resolve disputes privately rather than through formal courts. Similar findings were documented by Alonto (2025), who observed that cultural values emphasizing obedience and modesty contributed to women's silence in the face of violence.

Meanwhile, qualitative themes in this study, bodily harm, betrayal, economic neglect, silence, shame, and prioritizing children's welfare, illustrated how culture and dependency shaped women's responses. Bodily harm remained the most recognized form of abuse, often justified as discipline or emotional outburst. This echoed Yusoff et al. (2022), who argued that economic and physical neglect were both forms of violence in Islamic contexts, yet were often normalized within marital relationships. The themes of betrayal and economic

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neglect also reflected the findings of Azmi et al. (2024), who emphasized that emotional and financial deprivation carried deep psychological consequences even when not visible. Respondents in this study endured emotional abandonment, infidelity, and withdrawal of financial support, interpreting these not as legal offenses but as marital problems to be tolerated.

Moreover the themes of silence and shame were particularly revealing. Women reported that remaining quiet about abuse was a way to maintain dignity and protect family reputation. This supported Sali and Usman (2023), who noted that women in Sulu commonly resolved violence through informal mediation, relying on barangay officials or religious leaders to maintain social peace. The respondents' narratives also aligned with De Guzman (2023), who found that institutional actors such as police and barangay personnel lacked consistent gender-sensitivity training, which discouraged victims from filing complaints. Silence was thus both a coping mechanism and a social expectation reinforced by community norms.

In fact, the respondents' emphasis on children's welfare as a reason for staying in abusive relationships reinforced the findings of Villanueva et al. (2021), who documented similar patterns of maternal self-sacrifice among Filipino mothers facing domestic violence. Participants in this study repeatedly stated that they endured abuse to protect their children from emotional trauma or community stigma. This suggested that motherhood became intertwined with endurance, validating Feminist Legal Theory's argument that gendered expectations perpetuated women's subordination even within legal protection systems.

Institutional factors further compounded these personal and cultural barriers. Respondents described a lack of coordination among barangay officials, police, and Shari'ah courts, resulting in inconsistent implementation of protection measures. This finding supported the observations of Dihayco-Garciano et al. (2023), who highlighted the need for stronger gender-sensitivity education among future law enforcers. The absence of uniform enforcement mechanisms meant that many women relied on informal settlements rather than formal legal processes. Sukendar et al. (2023) similarly reported that in Indonesia, women often preferred community mediation for its speed and privacy, even if it limited accountability. The same pattern was evident in this study, where reconciliation was prioritized over justice.

Finally, the results reinforced what Legal Consciousness Theory described as women's selective and experience-based understanding of law. Respondents' perceptions of RA 9262 and PD 1083 were filtered through culture, faith, and personal survival. Many viewed formal law as distant or inaccessible, echoing Hamdani and Ahmad's (2024) observation that community-based support networks in Muslim societies filled the gap left by weak institutions. From a Social Ecological perspective, these behaviors reflected the connection between personal, familial, and community systems that shaped how women responded to violence. The findings thus demonstrated that improving awareness was necessary but not sufficient; empowerment required accessible institutions and culturally rooted advocacy.

As a gist, the study affirmed that legal frameworks existed but were not fully internalized or operationalized at the community level. The combination of civil and Shari'ah systems created both strength and confusion, reinforcing the need for harmonized education and enforcement. As noted by Macarandang (2021) and Tan (2024), meaningful protection could only emerge when laws were contextualized within cultural and religious values. This study's findings supported that view, concluding that women's empowerment in Sulu depended not only on knowing the law but also on having the confidence, community backing, and institutional support to invoke it.

Study Limitations

This study was limited to women residing in Jolo, Sulu, and therefore may not represent all Muslim women across the Bangsamoro region or the Philippines. The use of purposive sampling focused only on respondents who consented to participate, which may have excluded more vulnerable or isolated victims. Cultural sensitivity also restricted the depth of some interview responses, as participants hesitated to disclose intimate details of abuse. Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported awareness, which may not fully capture actual knowledge or behavioral outcomes. Lastly, the limited number of qualitative participants means that findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than universally representative. Future studies could expand geographic coverage and include the perspectives of men, religious leaders, and institutional actors to provide a more holistic understanding of the issue.

Conclusion

The study concludes that women in Sulu possess a moderate awareness of both RA 9262 and PD 1083, yet they face substantial barriers to exercising their rights. While they recognize physical and sexual violence, knowledge of psychological, emotional, and economic abuse remains limited. Their lived experiences reveal enduring patterns of bodily harm, betrayal, neglect, silence, and shame, all reinforced by cultural expectations and concern for children's welfare.

Moreover, the coexistence of civil and Shari'ah systems reflects both opportunity and constraint. It offers multiple avenues for justice but also creates uncertainty that discourages women from seeking help. Without clear institutional guidance, legal pluralism risks

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becoming legal confusion. True protection requires bridging these systems through culturally sensitive education, unified enforcement, and the active participation of community and religious leaders.

To conclude empowerment for women in Sulu cannot rest solely on the existence of laws. It must be grounded in awareness, dignity, and the assurance that justice is attainable without fear or stigma. Strengthening coordination between civil and Shari'ah institutions, training local authorities, and creating safe, accessible support systems are essential steps toward ensuring that both RA 9262 and PD 1083 serve not as overlapping frameworks, but as complementary forces for women's safety and equality.

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