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### Social Work Students' Awareness And Knowledge of Domestic Violence

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#### Abstract

Malaysians are frequently exposed to information about the problem of domestic violence, which affects children, women, the elderly, and maids. In order to address this issue, it is critical to increase the knowledge, awareness, and involvement of community members of all ages. To that end, a study was conducted to determine students' level of awareness and knowledge about important aspects of domestic violence, such as the provision of policies, rights, and available assistance channelled through various organisations to victims of violence. This quantitative study collected data by distributing a set of questionnaires. The study surveyed 132 Social Work students in their first through fourth years at one of Malaysia's public universities. The students were chosen because they are most likely to work in social service organisations after graduation. Descriptive statistics was used to determine social work students' level of awareness and knowledge about domestic violence. The findings indicated that respondents had a moderate level of awareness regarding domestic violence. Meanwhile, their awareness of the Domestic Violence Act's provisions, rights, and available assistance services for victims of domestic violence was limited. The findings of this study demonstrate a lack of awareness and understanding among Social Work students regarding domestic violence. There were a few respondents who retained gender-stereotypical beliefs toward domestic violence victims and perpetrators. Thus, it is proposed that extended awareness and practical training programmes concerning domestic violence be provided through a comprehensive educational syllabus to assist students in increasing their level of awareness and understanding about domestic violence. This is hoped to increase students' readiness and ability to deal with domestic violence cases in their professional endeavours.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, level of awareness, level of knowledge, Social Work students, Malaysia

#### Introduction

Domestic violence is a not-so-new phenomenon. Worldwide, 243 million women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 have been victims of sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by their respective partners (Kumar, 2020). In Malaysia, a 2014 study done by the Center for Women and Gender Research (KANITA) at Universiti Sains Malaysia discovered that 9% of married women in Peninsular Malaysia had experienced domestic violence. This number has risen from 4,807 in 2014 to 5,014 in 2015 (Women's Aid Organization, 2017).

The introduction of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia as a critical measure to curb the spread of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has also led in an increase in domestic violence reports. The stress caused by various problems such as layoffs, financial problems, security, health, daily problems, and social limitations during a pandemic, further adds to the tendency of the increasing number of domestic violence cases among the community (Kumar, 2020). For instance, in April 2020, a 40-year-old woman in Bangi, Selangor, was regularly battered by her unemployed husband. After stabbing his wife and father-in-law, the husband hanged himself (The Star, May 20, 2020). In August 2020, a woman was discovered dead near a lake in Pinggiran Cyberjaya, Dengkil. According to police investigations, the woman's husband strangled her to death with a hijab, put her body in a vehicle, and then pretended to search for his wife after she allegedly failed to return home after work (Rafidah, Berita Harian, August 2, 2020). On 29 January 2021, a seven-year-old boy was discovered dead in a water container at his home, reported to have been abused by his biological mother and stepfather (Amir, BHarian, January 30, 2021). The child's parents claimed that the child drowned while bathing. However, the autopsy carried out found traces of old and new bruises and wounds on the child's body.

The cases above are just some examples of the increase in domestic violence cases in Malaysia since the enforcement of the MCO began on March 18, 2020. Berita Harian reported that in just 34 days (March 18 to April 20, 2020), a total of 409 cases of domestic violence have been reported (Muhammad Afham, April 21, 2020). The Royal Malaysian Police recorded a total of 5,260 cases of domestic violence for the period of January to December 2020, while for the months of January to April 2021, a total of 902 cases of domestic violence were reported (Latifah, May 4, 2021). Sisters in Islam (SIS), one of the non-governmental organizations, stated that cases of violence reported to the organizations in 2020 increased by 23 percent, compared to 15 percent in 2019 (Juani, June 1, 2021, Utusan Malaysia Online). Forms of violence recorded by SIS included physical abuse (37%), psychological abuse (31%), financial abuse (16%), social abuse (11%), and sexual violence (5%). The increase in reported cases indicates that there is awareness among the community to take appropriate action to prevent further violence. This is very important given that previously, many people considered domestic violence as a personal issue that should not be made public.

The Domestic Violence Act of 1994 is the result of efforts by various parties, including government agencies and non-governmental organizations, to curb this form of violence. Among its goals are to impose appropriate action on the perpetrators, guarantee the rights of victims, and raise awareness among all parties about the need to pay attention to cases of violence that occur in the country. Amendments in 2017 were made to further strengthen its content in line with current developments. Section 2, Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act 2017, among others, defines violence as an act that may cause physical injury to an individual, intentionally or unintentionally placing an individual in fear; psychological and emotional abuse; confining or detaining a victim; forcing or threatening to commit an act sexually; and damaging property with the intent to create grief or annoyance to the victim. The Act also details the individuals covered, namely spouses or husbands, ex-wives or husbands, children under 18, other individuals living in the same household, such as the elderly, disabled adults, other family members, and maids. Offences committed under this Act should be considered together with the Penal Code; for example, Section 322 for offences of causing grievous bodily harm and Section 326 for offences of intentionally causing injury by using a weapon or dangerous object.

Social workers are among those responsible for reducing domestic violence and empowering victims of violence (Ming Teoh, The Star, August 14, 2020). The role of social workers in addressing this issue includes attempting to change the aggressive behavior of perpetrators, ensuring the safety of victims, children, and other individuals involved, and, finally, empowering the victims. Social workers can intervene to educate couples about the consequences of violence not only on themselves, but also on their children and other family members. The interventions used must focus on motivating couples to change their problematic family situation. Social workers also work directly with children who have been impacted by domestic violence in order to improve and strengthen family relationships (Galántai, Ligeti, Wirth, 2019; Hunter, Barnett, & Kaganas, 2018). More importantly, social workers must comprehend the impact of violence on the victims' mental health.

Since social workers are required to work with the entire family, they must interact with perpetrators and encourage them to change for the better. If there is no way to improve family interaction, social workers should use legal provisions to help distance or separate the victim from the perpetrator, ultimately securing the victim's rights and safeguarding the victim's interests. As a result, resolving domestic violence is a difficult task. To effectively address the problem, a holistic approach is required (Robbins, Banks, McLaughlin, Bellamy & Thackray, 2016; Robbins, 2014). To accomplish this goal, social workers must have knowledge and skills in intervention methods, knowledge of relevant rules and policies, as well as good relationships with the various agencies involved, in order to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

In line with the roles to be played by social workers, exploratory studies have been conducted to examine the knowledge of Social Work students about domestic violence. Preliminary research by Danis and Lockhart (2003) and Salimbeni (2011) revealed that most social work students had little knowledge of violence and were unprepared to help victims of domestic violence. According to Danis and Lockhart (2003), 70% of 370 students did not have a good understanding of the problem of domestic violence. Both studies found that there were respondents who viewed domestic violence as a problem involving family relationships that should not be intervened by outsiders. They were also unaware of domestic violence policy provisions, rights, and assistance services available to victims of domestic violence. Both of these studies came to the conclusion that students who were unfamiliar with domestic violence would be less prepared to deal with such issues.

Based on the findings of the preceding studies, the current researchers wanted to investigate the level of awareness and knowledge about domestic violence among Social Work students at one of Malaysia's universities. The study's objectives were to (i) determine students' awareness of domestic violence and (ii) determine students' level of knowledge about the policies and services available to victims of domestic violence. The emphasis was on Social Work students because they are the next generation of social workers who will be responsible for empowering community members, including those involved in domestic violence.

## Literature Review

The increased number of domestic violence cases necessitates the use of knowledgeable and capable social workers to assist clients. Domestic violence social workers require specialised skills that are sometimes at odds with the medical field's view of "only one right solution" to mental health problems or other interventions in social work (such as interventions with people with disabilities or substance abuse) (Buchbinder, Eisikovits & Karnieli-Miller, 2004). This is due to the fact that unprepared social workers can be harmful to their clients who are victims of domestic violence. Inappropriate or ineffective responses by social workers can influence clients' choices, harm clients, or cause clients to refuse to seek help even when they desperately need it (Goldblatt, Buchbinder, Eisikovits, & Arizon-Mesinger, 2009; Goldblatt & Buchbinder, 2014). As a result, Social Work students must be well-versed in domestic violence. Domestic violence educational curricula should be comprehensive and specific interventions, rather than focusing solely on competency and professional aspects (Danis & Lockhart, 2003; Callorasi, 2005; Hawkins, 2007; Moody, 2020). As a result, Social Work education should re-examine this aspect and make improvements to existing policies or procedures to ensure that higher education continues to produce graduates who are holistic and capable of assisting clients.

Many other studies have found a lack of knowledge about domestic violence among social work professionals and students. According to Rose, Trevillion, Woodall, Morgan, Feder, and Howard (2011), mental health service providers failed to identify clients who were victims of domestic violence. The interview method was used in this qualitative study of 18 users of mental health services and 20 professionals providing mental health services in South London. Fear of consequences (including the possibility of involving the Social Service Department, which could have implications in child custody) and concern that no one would believe them were among the reasons given by service users for not disclosing their domestic violence problems. Victims were also concerned about the

reactions of perpetrators, were ashamed of being abused, and believed that family problems were private and should not be disclosed to others. Meanwhile, professionals cited the following reasons for failing to identify victims of violence: the scope of their work, which limits the actions they can take, and their limited ability to deal with the problem. Both groups identified diagnostic methods and treatment models that place an emphasis on symptoms as outlined in work procedures as a barrier to sharing incidents of domestic violence.

In 2013, Nyame, Howard, Feder, and Trevillion conducted a study on mental health professionals as well. It was carried out among psychiatrists and nurses working in the field of mental health to assess their attitudes and readiness to respond to domestic violence. This study included a total of 131 participants. According to the study, only 20 psychiatrists asked clients about domestic violence on a regular basis, and 36 of them provided information about the services that clients could obtain. Sixty percent of psychiatrists agreed that they were unaware of the resources available to their patients. Nurses were found to be more prepared than psychiatrists to serve victims of violence. Both of the study's findings highlight the importance of professionals having the necessary knowledge and methods to identify clients who are victims of domestic violence when they seek mental health services.

Besides the studies conducted with the mental health professionals, there were also studies conducted with students' population. Hawkins (2007) conducted a study with 236 Social Work students at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels of education to assess their knowledge and preparedness to assist victims of domestic violence. According to the findings, students believed that the primary causes of violence were; (i) the situation or environment that led to the violence, (ii) perpetrators, (iii) individualistic community members, and (iv) the victims themselves. There were still students who blamed victims and believed in myths about keeping personal relationships with outsiders secret. Students from rural areas were found to be more likely to hold such beliefs. Despite the fact that these students had taken domestic violence courses, the study found no significant effect on victim-blaming attitudes or acceptance of these myths. According to Peter (2006), myths and inaccurate knowledge of domestic violence, which may be socially ingrained in social workers, can result in inappropriate or ineffective responses to a client if such personal beliefs are not corrected.

Doran and Hutchinson (2017) conduct a study to better understand the beliefs and attitudes of nursing undergraduate students about domestic violence on three campuses in New South Wales, Australia. Nurses play an important role in identifying victims of domestic violence through early screening and in assisting victims in receiving the necessary help and support. As a result, researchers believe that undergraduate education is critical for shaping attitudes and applying a comprehensive understanding of domestic violence. The study discovered that many students understood domestic violence issues and the consequences of the problem. Nonetheless, there were students who exhibited attitudes indicative of a lack of knowledge about domestic violence. Violence in intimate relationships was normal to them, and they blamed the victims. Worden and Carlson (2005) previously reported on this belief, stating that women's behaviour can contribute to domestic violence, with many believing women allowed themselves to be abused and the majority believing women could easily leave such relationships. According to their findings, the majority of members of society believe that domestic violence is rooted in individuals and families, with only a small percentage believing that domestic violence is rooted in society and culture.

Black, Weizz, and Bennet (2010) investigated the perspectives of 124 social work students on the causes and dynamics of domestic violence, as well as proposed interventions based on the case scenarios presented. The majority of respondents have a Master's degree in Social Work with a focus on mental health perspectives. Nonetheless, the study discovered that only a small percentage of respondents were aware of domestic violence interventions. Many respondents believed that perpetrators' mental health and substance abuse issues were the root causes of domestic violence. When comparing graduates specialising in domestic violence to other Social Work graduates, there were no significant differences in opinion regarding the proposed interventions as well as the causal factors of domestic violence. Based on the case scenarios, the respondents appeared to have insufficient knowledge to effectively intervene in the problems. In general, they were more likely to recommend

that individual and family counselling be provided. According to the study, the majority of respondents preferred counselling-focused interventions over domestic violence-specific interventions. Respondents, according to researchers, should use specific terminologies in addressing domestic violence, such as intervention with perpetrators, domestic violence counselling, possible legal actions, safety planning, and available shelter for victims. As a result, specific actions to increase specific knowledge about domestic violence are desperately needed, as simply implementing the general programme is insufficient.

Hefernan, Blythe, and Nicolson (2004) investigated the competencies of social workers in the Britain to identify cases of domestic violence, as well as the training they typically received. This study also examined the extent to which social workers' awareness of policies and practises influences their attitudes toward domestic violence. The researchers used both the quantitative method (via the distribution of questionnaires to 181 social workers) and the qualitative method (through structured interviews with 19 social workers). This study's respondents stated that they could identify victims of domestic violence based on actions such as punching, threatening to commit violence, slapping, having non-consensual sex, stifling individuals' social lives, and verbal violence. Respondents stated that they received insufficient training in the area of domestic violence. Half of those responded to the survey stated that they had never received domestic violence training. One-third of the respondents stated that they have qualifications in this field, but that the training provided was insufficient. As a result, the researchers proposed that detailed training on domestic violence be provided at the university and college levels. Traditional teaching methods, such as lectures and seminars, must be combined with the component of in-service learning. Students must be given hands-on experience with cases of domestic violence. This can directly increase students' knowledge and skills on the real-life delivery of services related to domestic violence.

Clark and Wyndall's study (2015) found that social workers in schools have low awareness of children experiencing domestic violence, to the point that they do not take appropriate action in helping the children. This was compounded by the children's reluctance to report that they had been abused, resulting in their not getting the help they needed. This stemmed from a fear that the information provided would be ignored, as well as a fear of repercussions. Failure to get help can affect personal development, the ability to control emotions, and the ability to communicate. Holt (2015) posits that social workers need to have the skills to encourage children to communicate openly about violence in the family and be able to provide the emotional support children need. This is in line with other research findings where a healthy school environment, having someone already known to students to be emotionally and socially helpful, and the opportunity to discuss these issues are significant coping mechanisms for children experiencing domestic violence (Stanley, Miller, Richardson, Forster, 2012; Clark and Wyndall, 2015; David, LeBlanc, & Self-Brown, 2015).

The studies above show the general lack of awareness among social work students and professional workers in social work-related fields of knowledge and services that can be channeled to clients experiencing domestic violence. In Malaysia, such studies are still in their infancy. Iffahinani, Lukman, Normala, Azlini, and Kamal (2018) reported findings of their quantitative study among 300 social work students aged between 19 and 26 years old about domestic violence on (i) obtaining information/knowledge on issues of domestic violence from outside sources; and (ii) identifying knowledge on domestic violence. More than 80% of respondents obtained information about domestic violence through social and mass media, as opposed to workshops (9.3%) or seminars (17.3%). Most respondents were aware of the occurrences of domestic violence, with 98.7 percent agreeing that victims should seek help from professional social workers. At the same time, the majority of respondents (97.3 percent) agreed that they needed more knowledge and social work skills to work with victims. These researchers proposed that the Domestic Violence Act be tightened in order to reduce the number of occurrences of the problem. Since, there aren't many studies about this in Malaysia, this study is trying to fill in the gaps in the literature.



## Methodology

A questionnaire was used to collect data for this quantitative study. The questionnaire is divided into three sections. Part A contains demographic information about the students who are taking part in the study. Part B focuses on students' awareness of domestic violence. This section contains 11 questions based on previous research (Danis & Lockhart, 2003; Colarossi, 2005; Salimbeni, 2011). In this study, awareness refers to students' understanding and concern about domestic violence in terms of concepts, issues, and scenarios. Section B measurements were taken using a five-point Likert scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) slightly disagree, (3) disagree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. Section C assesses students' knowledge of policy provisions, client rights, and available support services for clients. This section contains 30 items that are graded as (1) False or (2) True. The items in this section are based on information obtained from the Department of Social Welfare's official website and the provisions of the Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act 2017.

The respondents were 177 Social Work students in their first to fourth years at one of Malaysia's public universities. The researchers obtained the assistance of four cohort leaders (student representatives) in each academic year to distribute questionnaires to their friends in order to collect data. The cohort leaders were briefed on the study's purpose and the information required in the questionnaire. Respondents were also assured that their responses to the questionnaire would be treated confidentially. It took five days to collect the data. A total of 132 completed forms were collected successfully.

In this study, a descriptive analysis covering frequency and percentage is used. The scores obtained for each item were used to calculate the level of awareness and knowledge. The minimum value of the score for Section B is 11, and the maximum value of the score is 55. The level of awareness about the problem of domestic violence was divided into three categories: low (scores of 11-25), moderate (scores of 26-40), and high (scores of 41-50). (scores 41-55). Section C has a minimum score value of 30 and a maximum score value of 60. Respondents with 30 to 40 points have a low level of knowledge in terms of policy provisions, rights, and available assistance services, according to this score. A score of 41 to 50 indicated a moderate level of knowledge, while a score of 51 to 60 indicated a high level of knowledge.

## Result

### *Respondents' Demographics*

Table 1 displays the demographic information of 132 respondents. Of these, only 28 (21%) were male respondents, compared to 104 (78.8%) female respondents. The Malays were the highest, with 120 respondents (90.9%), followed by the Chinese, represented by five respondents (3.8%), other races, including four Aborigines (3.0%), and only three (2.3%) of the respondents were Indians. All respondents were between 19 and 25 years old. Respondents aged 23–24 years had the highest frequency of 41 (31.1%), followed by 32 of the 21-year old (24.2%), and the 22-year old were represented by 29 respondents (22%). The lowest number of respondents was the age group of 25–represented by only two (1.5%). Because data collection was carried out in the first semester of the academic calendar, the respondents involved in the study were those in the first, third, fifth, and seventh semesters of study. The number of respondents varies in each semester as it depends on the total number of students enrolled. Respondents in semester seven were the most involved in the study with 45 respondents (34.1%), 37 respondents (28.0%) were in semester three, and semester five was represented by 30 respondents (22.7%), while the least number of respondents was in the first semester with 20 respondents (15.2%).

Table 1: Respondents' Demography (n=132)

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	28	21.2
Female	104	78.8
Age (year)		
19	3	2.3
20	19	14.4
21	32	24.2
22	29	22.0
23	41	31.1
24	6	4.5
25	2	1.5
Race		
Malay	120	90.9
Chinese	5	3.8
Indian	3	2.3
Others (Aborigine)	4	3.0
Study Semester		
1	20	15.2
3	37	28.0
5	30	22.7
7	45	34.1

A total of 61 respondents (46.2%) stated that the program they followed offered courses related to the problem of domestic violence, compared to 71 respondents (53.8%) stating otherwise. A total of 34 respondents (25.7%) stated that they had attended courses related to domestic violence, and a total of 95 (72%) respondents had attended classes related to the family. The variations in the answers given are due to the different semesters of study. In semester one and two, students are required to complete university core courses and program core courses only.

### ***Respondents' Awareness of Domestic Violence***

A total of 11 questions were used to assess the first objective of the study, which was to determine respondents' awareness of domestic violence (Table 2). For the first item, 90 (68%) of respondents said they 'slightly disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree' with the statement that society considers domestic violence to occur as a result of the wife's decision to remain in the situation. When asked about the gender of perpetrators of domestic violence (item 2), 38 (28.7 %) strongly agreed that domestic violence was frequently committed by men, while eight (6 %) strongly disagreed with the statement.

The majority of respondents (76.5 %) strongly agreed or agreed that women were frequently victims of domestic violence, while a small proportion (23.5 %) disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. A total of 86.7 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that husbands who used alcohol or drugs contributed to an increase in domestic violence cases. Family instability (71.9 %) and mass media were two other factors that contributed to the problem of domestic violence (50.7% ). A total of 115 (87.1 %) respondents disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement that wives' attitudes were a motivating factor in domestic violence. A small percentage of respondents (12.8 %) agreed that a wife who was beaten by her husband deserved to be beaten, while the vast majority (87.2 %) disagreed (Refer Table 2).

Table 2: Awareness of domestic violence (n = 132)

		Frequency / Percentage				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	Society considers domestic violence occurs because wives decide to remain in the situation.	22 (16.7)	21 (15.9)	47 (35.6)	30 (22.7)	12 (9.1)
2.	Domestic violence is often perpetrated by men.	8 (6)	12 (9.1)	28 (21.2)	46 (34.8)	38 (28.7)
3.	Women are usually victims of domestic violence.	3 (2.2)	7 (5.3)	21 (15.9)	48 (36.3)	53 (40.1)
4.	Increase in domestic violence partly due to the media.	3 (2.2)	15 (11.3)	47 (35.6)	40 (30.3)	27 (20.4)
5.	Wives' attitude normally encourage the occurrence of domestic violence.	6 (4.5)	25 (18.9)	57 (43.1)	34 (25.7)	10 (7.5)
6.	Wives seen deserving to be beaten by husbands.	41 (31)	34 (25.7)	40 (30.3)	11 (8.3)	6 (4.5)
7.	Domestic violence often occurs in unstable family situations.	2 (1.5)	9 (6.8)	26 (19.6)	50 (37.8)	45 (34)
8.	Alcohol or drug consumption among husbands are some of the factors contributing to domestic violence.	3 (2.2)	4 (3)	21 (15.9)	33 (25)	71 (53.7)
9.	Society considers domestic violence to be a common problem that often occurs in family relationships.	11 (8.3)	23 (17.4)	44 (33.3)	35 (26.5)	19 (14.3)
10.	Husband's temperament is one of the causes for violence.	2 (1.5)	5 (3.7)	22 (16.7)	49 (37)	54 (40.9)
11.	Domestic violence often occurs in families that are often isolated from society.	3 (2.2)	13 (9.8)	39 (29.5)	56 (42.4)	21 (15.9)

According to the study method, the respondent's score will determine their level of awareness about domestic violence. According to the analysis, 46 (34.7 %) of respondents had a high level of awareness, while 19 (14.3 %) had a low level of awareness. With 67 (51.8 percent) respondents, the majority were at a moderate level of awareness. When the level of awareness was broken down by gender, four (14.2%) male respondents and 15 (14.4%) female respondents had a low level of awareness. The results of the awareness level based on gender are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Level of awareness of domestic violence by gender (n = 132)

Awareness Level	Frequency / Percentage		Total
	Male (n=28)	Female (n=104)	
Low	4 (14.2)	15 (14.4)	19 (14.3)
Moderate	17 (60.7)	50 (48.1)	67 (51)
High	7 (25.1)	39 (37.5)	46 (34.7)

When the domestic violence level of awareness was examined according to the semester of study, it was discovered that 18 of the 46 respondents who were at a high level of awareness were in the seventh semester, compared to 10 respondents in the third semester, and a total of nine respondents each from the first and fifth semesters (Table 4). A total of seven respondents in the third semester demonstrated a low level of awareness, compared to six in the seventh semester and three in the first and fifth semesters. As previously stated, a total of 67 respondents demonstrated a moderate level of awareness,



with the highest number demonstrated by respondents from the seventh semester (21 respondents) and third semester (20 respondents).

Table 4: Level of awareness of domestic violence by the semester of study

Level of Awareness	Frequency				Total
	Semester 1	Semester 3	Semester 5	Semester 7	
Low	3	7	3	6	19
Moderate	8	20	18	21	67
High	9	10	9	18	46

### ***Respondents' Knowledge of Policy Provisions, Rights and Support Services***

The second objective of this study is to determine respondents' level of knowledge about the policy provisions relating to victims' rights and assistance services. A total of 30 items were created using information from the Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act 2017 and the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia's official website. This section's items were graded on a scale of 'True' or 'False.' The responses of the respondents were compared to the actual answers to the statements. Table 5 shows some of the results.

Table 5: Knowledge of the provisions of domestic violence-related policies, rights, and assistance services (n = 132)

Statements		Respondents' Correct Answers	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	The Domestic Violence Act only focuses on women.	64	48.5
2.	Senior citizens who are victims of domestic violence can seek protection under the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act.	113	85.6
3.	The period for a protection order in the Domestic Violence Act is 12 months.	36	27.3
4.	Under the Domestic Violence Act, only victims can file a complaint of violence.	85	64.4
5.	The Act stipulates that victims can only report cases of domestic violence to the Department of Social Welfare.	84	63.6
6.	Counselling services for victims of domestic violence are only available at the Department of Social Welfare.	58	43.9
7.	Victims of domestic violence will be offered compensation by the court in respect of injury or damage or loss.	78	59.1
8.	Hospital is one of the agencies involved in helping victims of domestic violence.	114	86.4
9.	The process of applying for temporary protection is also done by non-governmental organizations.	102	77.3
10.	Non-governmental organizations also provide temporary shelter to victims of abuse.	107	81.1

According to the table above, there were respondents who were unaware of the provisions of policies, rights, and available assistance services provided by various parties. The respondents' feedback was found to be inconsistent with the actual answers. A large number of respondents gave incorrect answers

to some of the questions about domestic violence knowledge. Only 64 (48.5 %) of respondents correctly answered the statement "The Domestic Violence Act 2017 only focuses on women." The reality is that this Act applies to everyone in the household, including children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and maids. Only 36 (27.3 %) of respondents correctly answered the third question about the validity period of the Interim Protection Order (IPO), which is 12 months. The IPO granted expires once the investigation into the violence cases is completed. Only 18 (13.6 %) of respondents were unaware that hospitals were also involved in assisting victims of domestic violence, compared to 114 (86.4 %) who correctly answered the question.

The knowledge of respondents was assessed using score values that were divided into three categories; (i) high level of knowledge (score 51–60), (ii) moderate level of knowledge (score 41–50), and (iii) low level of knowledge (score 30–40). The results show that only two (1.5%) respondents had a high level of knowledge, 18 (13.7%) respondents had a moderate level of knowledge, and 102 (77.3%) respondents had a low level of knowledge. Table 6 shows the level of knowledge based on gender and semester of study. Two of the respondents with a high level of knowledge were females. The majority of respondents in both categories, males and females, were at the low end of the scale. According to the semester of study, both of the female respondents with a high level of knowledge studied in semester seven. Only one respondent from semester five had a moderate level of knowledge, compared to six respondents from semester one and semester three.

Table 6: Respondents' level of knowledge on policy provisions, rights, and available assistance services based on gender and semester of study (n = 132)

	Frequency Level Of Knowledge		
	Low	Moderate	High
Gender			
Male	24	4	0
Female	78	24	2
Study Semester			
1	14	6	0
3	31	6	0
5	29	1	0
7	28	15	2

## Discussion and Recommendations

This study's awareness component examined students' understanding of domestic violence. The study discovered that students had a moderate level of awareness of domestic violence. Unfortunately, their understanding of domestic violence policies, rights, and available assistance services is limited. They also lacked knowledge about agencies or organisations that provide services other than the Department of Social Welfare, as well as the various types of assistance available to victims. The majority of the students in this study did not understand the policy provisions and victims' rights outlined in the Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act of 2017. Almost half of them claimed that the Domestic Violence Act was solely aimed at women. This finding is not surprising when compared to previous studies. Danis and Lockhart (2003), Peter (2006), Goldblatt and Buchbinder (2014), and Hefernan, Blythe, and Nicolson (2014), for example, found similar results. If not addressed immediately, this situation will impede students' ability and capability to carry out interventions for domestic violence cases in their working lives (Rose, Trevillion, Woodall, Morgan, Feder, & Howard, 2011). A lack of information and knowledge among social workers or social service providers about policy provision, client rights, and available forms of domestic violence services can indeed have an impact on the services provided to clients. This is supported by a study conducted by Nyame, Howard, Feder, and Trevillion (2013), which found that most professionals in the field of mental health failed to convey the

type of assistance available to clients identified as having mental health problems due to a lack of information. This may adversely affect the client.

There were also a few students who blamed women as one of the causes of domestic violence. These findings reflect students' lack of knowledge about domestic violence. Furthermore, gender stereotypes and victim-blaming attitudes are still prevalent among students. Many other researchers in this field have reached similar conclusions, including Worden and Calson (2005), Hawkins (2007), Goldblatt, Buchbinder, Eisikovits, and Arizon-Mesinger (2009), and Doran and Hutchinson (2010). (2017). According to the findings of these studies, respondents believed that victims were also a factor of violence because of their attitudes and continued involvement in the relationships. Victims who remain in abusive relationships may do so for a variety of reasons, including fear of the perpetrators and fear of losing custody of their children. According to studies conducted among nursing students in Australia, even though nursing students' beliefs and perceptions were consistent with current views on domestic violence, they still had gender stereotypical attitudes toward victims and perpetrators of domestic violence (Doran, & Hutchinson, 2017). A similar conclusion was reached in a study by Black, Weisz, and Bannett (2010).

The lack of awareness and knowledge was observed not only among new students in the first semester, but also among students in semesters five and seven in the current study. They should be more aware of domestic violence issues at that age and level of education. This finding deserves special attention because all of the respondents are university students studying Social Work. Students enrolled in this programme must take core courses in social policy, ethics, and law, as well as be exposed to the Domestic Violence Act. In the first and second semesters, students are required to take social work intervention courses (involving individuals, groups, families, and communities). Students can choose from a variety of concentration courses, including family-related intervention courses that focus on domestic violence, intervention with children, social work with the elderly, mental health, and health service. If this situation is not addressed immediately, it will have a negative impact not only on the quality of graduates in the Program, but also on their ability to persuade potential employers of their abilities.

In addition, the situation if not addressed immediately will hinder the ability and capability of students to carry out domestic violence interventions that they will face as social workers. A review of previous studies as discussed before shows that there are indeed constraints on social workers and professionals in the field of social services to provide services to domestic violence clients. This is because social workers were found as having (i) a lack of knowledge to identify clients with domestic violence problems (Rose, Trevillion, Woodall, Morgan, Feder, & Howard, 2011; Clark & Wnydall, 2015), (ii) a lack of knowledge of specific domestic violence interventions (Black, Weizz & Bennet, 2010; Clark & Wnydall, 2015), (iii) scope of duties (referring to policy provisions, rules, and work procedures) and knowledge of policies that limit opportunities for them to assist (Rose, Trevillion, Woodall, Morgan, Feder, & Howard, 2011; Goldblatt & Buchbinder, 2014; Hefernan, Blythe & Nicolson, 2014), and (iv) lack of communication skills with clients facing domestic violence (Black, Weizz & Bennet, 2010; Holt, 2015).

Based on these recent findings, ongoing efforts must be made to raise student awareness and knowledge. Practical training on how to intervene and respond in cases of violence should be expanded rather than focusing solely on theoretical aspects. This is consistent with previous findings (Young & Baker, 2004; Block, 2012; Meissel, Meyer, Yao, Rubie-Davies, 2017) that students' knowledge levels can be increased when learning patterns include more hands-on and practical training rather than lectures on theories. Internship programmes with officers who are subject matter experts should also be expanded. Such programmes will allow students to gain practical knowledge from officers who are directly involved in intervening in domestic violence cases. Hands-on learning not only raises students' awareness and increases their knowledge of important aspects of domestic violence, but it also allows them to practise effective case management procedures for themselves (Danis, & Lockhart, 2003; Black, Weizz, & Bennet, 2010; Block, 2012; Hefernan, Blythe, & Nicolson, 2014). This method of learning has been identified as an effective technique for knowledge delivery (Tishman, 2017).

Previous research has also suggested that more opportunities for social work students to participate in research activities related to domestic violence issues should be provided (Chen & Gao, 2021). Student participation in domestic violence research seminars, conventions, or paper presentations will expose students' minds to the need to investigate these issues and assist them in identifying the most recent factors contributing to the occurrence of domestic violence. Students' participation in research can also (i) raise their awareness of the most recent interventions that can be used in domestic violence cases, and (ii) raise their competency in providing professional assistance services to future victims of domestic violence.

Aside from the aforementioned learning programmes, the Social Work Program administration can continue to encourage students to attend talks and workshops organised by the Program in collaboration with various parties such as the Department of Social Welfare, hospitals, the Malaysian Social Workers Association, and other advocates in the field. Furthermore, the Department of Social Welfare, other social agencies, and non-governmental organisations such as the Women's Center for Change and the Women's Aid Organization frequently organise online domestic violence programmes. Information about these initiatives can be disseminated to students on a continuous basis so that they can participate. To encourage participation, the Program could provide special incentives, such as certificates, to students who completed a certain number of training hours. Alternatively, these talks or workshops could be made mandatory as extracurricular activities for Social Work students. Despite the difficulties, the administration of Social Work Programs should be determined and persistent in their efforts to change students' attitudes. Mendler (2009) contends that educators' determination and continuous motivation can inspire learning in students, particularly those who are not enthusiastic, are not interested, and are not focused on learning and academic achievement. As students are expected to be knowledgeable individuals capable of guiding and channelling the best assistance after graduation, these initiatives should be undertaken by Program management. Most importantly, these students will bear the University's name. Hence, there is an urgent need to prepare them to be the best possible future social workers.

## Conclusion

The majority of the students in this study had a moderate level of knowledge about domestic violence, including the causes of violence and society's general perception of domestic violence. At the same time, their knowledge of domestic violence policy provisions, rights, and available services for victims of domestic violence was limited. This is particularly concerning given that the students involved in this study were from the Social Work Program. They are the future social workers tasked with improving the social well-being of the community, including the issue of domestic violence. According to the findings, the Program management should make comprehensive efforts to increase student awareness and knowledge, including adding practical training to gain hands-on experience, rather than just imparting knowledge in theory.

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