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FULL-LENGTH RESEARCH ARTICLE

Domestic Violence and Post-Abuse Divorce as Social Development Challenges: Institutional Innovation, Social Protection, and Survivor Well-being

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) and divorce following abuse are often treated as private crises, legal events, or family transitions. This article argues that they are also social development challenges because they shape survivors' safety, economic security, housing stability, psychosocial health, social participation, and child and family well-being. Drawing on feminist institutionalism, the capability approach, and social development perspectives, the article develops an integrated conceptual framework for understanding how institutional arrangements shape post-abuse vulnerability and recovery. The analysis highlights recurring gaps in legal, welfare, housing, psychosocial, and child protection systems, particularly fragmentation, bureaucratic burden, weak coordination, and unequal access among marginalised survivors. It also examines how survivor-centred institutional responses, including coordinated services, trauma-informed practice, safe digital access, economic support, and community prevention, may reduce exclusion and restore substantive freedoms. The article proposes an integrated social development model that links structural inequality, institutional responses, capability restoration, prevention, and long-term survivor and child well-being. It argues that effective reform must move beyond short-term crisis response toward coordinated protection that supports safety, autonomy, social participation, emotional support, and durable reintegration. The article contributes by repositioning DV and post-abuse divorce as linked survivor well-being issues rather than separate legal, family, or service delivery problems.

Keywords: domestic violence; post-abuse divorce; survivor well-being; institutional responses; social development

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being; SDG 5: Gender Equality

1. Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) and divorce following abuse are often addressed as separate concerns: violence as a protection or criminal justice issue, and divorce as a family or legal transition (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016). This separation can obscure how both processes are shaped by institutional arrangements, social inequality, and gendered power relations (Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025; Wilcox et al., 2021). Viewed through a social development lens, DV and post-abuse divorce are better understood as linked pathways through which welfare regimes, protection systems, and social exclusion influence survivors' long-term security, agency, and well-being.

In this article, the term survivor refers to a person who has experienced domestic violence and is navigating, or has navigated, separation, divorce, institutional assistance, and recovery after abuse. The term is used to emphasise agency and dignity while recognising that many survivors continue to face risk,

dependency, stigma, and institutional barriers after leaving an abusive relationship. Although much of the reviewed literature focuses on women because domestic violence and post-separation abuse are deeply gendered, the term also recognises that survivor well-being is shaped by children, caregiving responsibilities, social networks, and access to formal support.

DV occurs across income levels, cultures, and legal systems, but its consequences are unevenly distributed. Survivors in low-income households, migrant communities, rural areas, and other marginalised settings may face greater difficulty leaving abusive relationships because economic dependence, insecure employment, weak property rights, stigma, and limited institutional support restrict real choices (de Vaus et al., 2017; Ellsberg et al., 2022). DV should therefore not be understood only as interpersonal conflict. It is also a form of structural violence sustained by gendered inequalities in resources, authority, legal recognition, and social norms.

When DV leads to divorce, separation may improve safety but also introduce new risks: income loss, housing instability, disrupted caregiving arrangements, social stigma, and prolonged conflict over custody or maintenance (Ellsberg et al., 2022; de Vaus et al., 2017; Högnäs, 2020). These pressures may affect children's education, mental health, and social adjustment, particularly when family support and institutional assistance are weak, delayed, or difficult to access (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023; Colombini et al., 2017; Leopold, 2018; Hammervold et al., 2024). Legal, welfare, psychosocial, and community support systems therefore play a decisive role in whether divorce becomes a route to recovery or a pathway into deeper insecurity (Steinbacher, 2024; Bova, 2022; Cookson et al., 2024).

Although DV has received increasing policy attention, protection systems often remain fragmented across legal, welfare, housing, psychosocial, and child protection institutions. Survivors may need to navigate multiple agencies, different eligibility rules, repeated documentation requirements, and bureaucratic delays before receiving assistance (Childress et al., 2022; Barrios et al., 2021). Access to justice and protection may also be constrained by urban-rural inequalities, legal pluralism, and uneven service capacity (Ellsberg et al., 2022).

To address these gaps, the article proposes a more comprehensive social development framework that considers DV and post-abuse divorce as processes of structural exclusion and potential institutional change. It examines the capability approach, feminist institutionalism, social protection, and social innovation to explore the impact of the structural conditions and institutional setups on the trends and long-term welfare of the survivors. The synthesis identifies systemic constraints in existing institutional responses and highlights the importance of integrated, survivor-oriented, and capability-enhancing interventions. Through this synthesis, the article contributes to the literature by moving beyond fragmented and individualised explanations and by offering a structure that links structural inequality, institutional design, and developmental outcomes.

The article makes three contributions. First, it links DV and post-abuse divorce within a single survivor well-being framework rather than treating them as separate legal, family, or psychosocial issues. Second, it shows how institutional responses shape survivors' capabilities over time, particularly in relation to safety, housing, income security, psychosocial recovery, social participation, and child and family well-being. Third, it identifies how coordinated and survivor-centred institutional responses can reduce fragmentation and support long-term reintegration. Social protection and social innovation are therefore treated as policy and practice mechanisms within a broader survivor well-being framework, rather than as separate organising themes.

2. Methodology

The methodology was designed as a structured conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review or empirical study. The article uses published literature as its analytical material and develops an integrated framework by comparing, interpreting, and connecting concepts across domestic violence, post-abuse divorce, institutional response, social development, and survivor well-being scholarship. The section below clarifies the research design, literature sources, search parameters, selection criteria, screening logic, analytical strategy, and limitations of the approach.

2.1 Research Design

The research design was conceptual and analytical. The aim was to develop a model for understanding DV and post-abuse divorce trajectories as social development processes that affect survivor well-being (Rose et al., 2024; Spearman et al., 2023). The article does not generate primary empirical data. Instead, it uses published empirical studies, conceptual papers, reviews, and policy-oriented sources to develop concepts, integrate theories, and identify institutional mechanisms that shape recovery over time.

This approach was appropriate because the literature on DV, divorce, welfare, legal protection, housing, psychosocial support, and social development is often separated across disciplinary domains (Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025). A structured conceptual synthesis allows these perspectives to be brought together in order to explain how institutional systems shape survivors' safety, autonomy, social participation, economic security, psychosocial recovery, and child and family well-being.

The article should not be read as a systematic review claiming exhaustive coverage of all available studies. Rather, it adopts a transparent and purposeful literature selection strategy to support theory integration and framework development.

2.2 Sources of Literature

The literature search drew on interdisciplinary sources in social policy, development studies, gender studies, sociology, public health, family studies, and social work. Peer-reviewed journal articles, conceptual papers, systematic or scoping reviews, books or book chapters, and policy-relevant sources were considered where they contributed directly to the conceptual argument.

The literature search covered publications from 2015 to 2026. The search combined four groups of terms: (1) violence-related terms, such as “domestic violence”, “intimate partner violence”, “coercive control”, and “post-separation abuse”; (2) divorce and separation terms, such as “divorce”, “separation”, “post-divorce”, and “post-abuse divorce”; (3) institutional and support terms, such as “legal response”, “welfare”, “social protection”, “housing”, “child protection”, “psychosocial support”, and “institutional response”; and (4) theoretical and outcome terms, such as “capability approach”, “feminist institutionalism”, “social innovation”, “social exclusion”, “survivor recovery”, and “survivor well-being”.

Academic databases and search platforms, including Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection (including the Social Sciences Citation Index), PubMed, APA PsycInfo, and Google Scholar, were consulted. The use of Google Scholar was intended to support broader discovery of relevant scholarly and policy-relevant sources, while the curated bibliographic databases were used to identify peer-reviewed literature across social policy, public health, social work, psychology, gender studies, and family studies. The search was supplemented by backward reference checking of key review articles and highly relevant conceptual papers. The purpose of the search was not to estimate prevalence or intervention effectiveness, but to identify literature capable of informing an integrated conceptual framework on institutional responses and survivor well-being.

The figures reported in Table 1 are based on the authors' literature search and screening notes and are provided to improve transparency in the conceptual synthesis process. Since this article is a structured conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review, the counts indicate the literature identification and selection pathway used to build the conceptual framework rather than a claim of exhaustive coverage of the field.

Table 1. Summary of literature identification and selection

Stage	Number of Records/Sources	Decision/Notes
Sources identified through academic databases and search platforms	156	Scopus; Web of Science Core Collection, including the Social Sciences Citation Index; PubMed; APA PsycInfo; and Google Scholar. Searches combined DV/IPV terms, post-separation/divorce terms, institutional response/social protection terms, and survivor well-being/capability terms.

Table 1 (continued)

Stage	Number of Records/Sources	Decision/Notes
Additional sources identified through backward reference checking	24	Key reviews, conceptual papers, policy-relevant sources, and references traced from highly relevant papers.
Sources excluded after title/abstract or relevance screening	96	Excluded for limited relevance to DV, post-abuse divorce, institutional responses, survivor well-being, conceptual synthesis, or social development framing.
Full texts assessed for conceptual relevance	84	Assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria and reviewed for conceptual relevance to institutional responses and survivor well-being.
Full texts excluded after assessment	37	Excluded for primarily clinical or biomedical focus, weak theoretical/methodological grounding, lack of social/institutional relevance, duplication of arguments, or limited contribution to the conceptual framework.
Final sources retained for conceptual synthesis	47	Sources used to develop the integrated social development model and support the discussion of survivor well-being, institutional responses, prevention, and policy implications.

Note. The figures summarise the literature selection pathway used for the conceptual synthesis. Because the article is not presented as a systematic review, the table is intended to improve transparency in source identification and screening, not to make a PRISMA-style claim of exhaustive coverage.

2.3 Selection Criteria

The selection process used inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure conceptual relevance and analytical coherence (Snyder, 2019). Sources were included if they met at least one of the following criteria: (1) they examined DV, intimate partner violence, post-separation abuse, divorce, or post-abuse family transitions within a social, institutional, legal, welfare, or development context; (2) they discussed structural inequality, social exclusion, social protection, housing, economic security, psychosocial support, child and family well-being, or institutional responses; or (3) they contributed directly to the theoretical lenses used in the article, particularly feminist institutionalism, the capability approach, social development, and social innovation.

Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on clinical diagnosis, individual psychopathology, biomedical treatment, or prevalence estimation without connecting the issue to social, institutional, or developmental conditions. Sources were also excluded if they lacked a clear methodological, theoretical, or policy basis, or if their relevance to DV, post-abuse divorce, institutional response, or survivor well-being was marginal.

These criteria were justified by the purpose of the article. Because the article develops a social development framework rather than a clinical or legal review, the selected literature needed to explain how institutional systems shape survivor vulnerability, recovery, and long-term well-being.

2.4 Analytical Approach

The analysis used critical interpretive synthesis to examine and connect the selected literature. This approach was appropriate because the article aimed to identify conceptual patterns, tensions, institutional gaps, and relationships across diverse bodies of literature rather than aggregate statistical findings. The analysis involved four stages. First, key concepts and arguments relevant to DV, post-abuse divorce, institutional responses, and survivor well-being were identified. Second, these concepts were grouped into thematic areas, including structural inequality, legal and welfare responses, housing and child protection, psychosocial support, economic security, social participation, prevention, and child and family well-being. Third, the themes were interpreted through feminist institutionalism, the capability approach, and social development perspectives. Fourth, the resulting synthesis was used to construct an integrated social development model that explains how institutional arrangements can either reproduce vulnerability or support recovery.

During synthesis, attention was given to whether the literature explained immediate safety, longer-term capability restoration, and durable reintegration. This helped keep survivor well-being at the centre of the analysis while reducing repetition across the sections.

2.5 Justification of Approach

A conceptual-analytical and critical interpretive approach is appropriate because DV and post-abuse divorce are shaped by intersecting legal, welfare, economic, psychosocial, housing, child protection, and cultural systems. Although much empirical research examines individual risk factors, service barriers, or discrete interventions, fewer studies explain how these factors operate together across institutional settings (Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025; Steinbacher, 2024; van der Walddt, 2024). This article therefore uses conceptual synthesis to connect structural inequality, institutional arrangements, survivor capabilities, and long-term well-being within a single framework. The aim is not to estimate prevalence or test one intervention, but to clarify how systems influence vulnerability, recovery, and survivor well-being over time.

3. Conceptualising Domestic Violence, Divorce and Social Exclusion

DV is often treated as a domestic or personal matter. From a social development perspective, however, it is better understood as a form of structural violence shaped by gendered power relations, institutional inequality, and social norms that normalise control and dependency (Rose et al., 2024; Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025). This framing matters because survivors' well-being after separation depends not only on personal resilience, but also on whether institutions enable safety, autonomy, economic security, social participation, and recovery.

At the micro level, DV manifests itself in the form of coercive control, including economic control, psychological control, sexual control, and physical abuse (de Vaus et al., 2017; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). At the meso level, these behaviours may be minimised by community standards that regard violence as a family problem (Bova, 2022). At the macro level, which includes labour markets, legal frameworks, and welfare systems, the problem may detrimentally affect the rights of women or prioritise personal safety over marital stability (Barrios et al., 2021; Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025; Steinbacher, 2024). These interdependent levels create structural circumstances that cause individuals to be more susceptible to violence while restricting any way out to safety (Johnson et al., 2022).

Institutional responses are not necessarily neutral, and this can result in inequality as an unintended consequence (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Childress et al., 2022; Hulley et al., 2023). As an example, reconciliation might occur because it is forced by police, courts, welfare agencies, or religious authorities, which, in the long term, may create procedural barriers to assistance. At the same time, unequal laws on property and inheritance can make the separation process more difficult, leaving the person in a financially difficult situation (Johnson et al., 2022; Steinbacher, 2024). Such institutional limitations are also characterised by intersecting inequalities in class, ethnicity, migration status, and disability that define the exposure to violence, as well as access to support (Hulley et al., 2023).

Within such a view, divorce following DV cannot be seen as either a legal or moral decision, but as a social form of development that has significant economic, social, and intergenerational consequences (Ellsberg et al., 2022; de Vaus et al., 2017). The restructuring of survivors' economic circumstances is usually accompanied by low income, inadequate access to resources, and high levels of care (Aubry et al., 2020). Financial insecurity may also be further increased because of the absence of effective enforcement of maintenance or child support (Osborn & Rajah, 2022).

Social reintegration proves to be a problem as well, with divorced women potentially facing stigmatisation, victim-blaming, and undermined kinship. The persistence of control or harassment can be increased due to the need to rebuild social networks when managing co-parenting (Spearman et al., 2023; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). The impact is also transferred to children, where exposure to violence and post-divorce turmoil could influence their psychosocial well-being and educational performance (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023; Nikupeteri et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these risks can be reduced with the help of favourable institutional conditions (Igiebor, 2023).

These experiences can be explained in terms of social exclusion, in which survivors are affected by the inaccessibility of resources, rights, and opportunities to fulfil their participation in society (Mir et al., 2024). The notion is further exacerbated by limited access to protection and justice because of institutional marginalisation (poor access to legal support, language, and substandard services) (Rabaan & Dombrowski, 2024; Sanhueza-Morales et al., 2025). Simultaneously, fear, lack of home security, childcare challenges, and unstable earnings may restrain the survivor's capacity to leave abusive partnerships and achieve independence (Hammervold et al., 2024).

These aspects lead to accumulated disadvantage in the long run, resulting in unemployment, higher health risks, and weaker social networks (Mir et al., 2024; Colombini et al., 2017; Schweiger, 2025). If left unaddressed, this disadvantage can have generational impacts, affecting the life opportunities of children and solidifying vulnerability cycles (Thielemans & Mortelmans, 2022). Therefore, considering DV and divorce as mutually supportive processes of structural violence and social exclusion emphasises the importance of combining social development strategies to address institutional failures, decrease inequality, and promote the long-term well-being of the survivors (Mir et al., 2024; Spearman et al., 2023). This framing is important because it shifts the analytical focus from the question of why survivors leave or remain in abusive relationships to the broader question of what social and institutional conditions make safety, recovery, and reintegration possible after separation.

4. Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored primarily in feminist institutionalism and the capability approach, supported by social development perspectives on institutional response and social protection. These perspectives are used to conceptualise DV and post-abuse divorce as interconnected processes that shape survivor well-being over time (Barrios et al., 2021; Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025). Rather than treating the frameworks as separate explanations, the article uses them to clarify the relationship between structural inequalities, institutional responses, survivor capabilities, and long-term well-being (Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025; Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Nikupeteri et al., 2023).

4.1 Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist institutionalism offers a structural approach to the study of gendered power relations and how they are institutionalised in both formal and informal institutions (Igiebor, 2023; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). Applied to DV and divorce, this viewpoint emphasises how legal, policy, and organisational procedures can create and reproduce inequality in order to determine the unequal access to protection and resources (Wilcox et al., 2021). The argument advanced here is that institutional responses to DV cannot be viewed solely as service limitations; they also express deeper gendered power dynamics that determine whose safety is prioritised and whose claims are accepted as valid (Abraham & Tastsoglou, 2016; Rose et al., 2024). Institutional arrangements are not neutral. Instead, they actively impact vulnerability to violence and the circumstances in which survivors seek protection and divorce (Osborn & Rajah, 2022; Spearman et al., 2023).

4.2 Capability Approach

The capability approach moves the discussion away from resources to the actual freedom of a person in an attempt to attain a better lifestyle (Robeyns, 2017). When applied to DV and post-divorce trajectories, it emphasises key capabilities, such as bodily safety, economic autonomy, social participation, and psychosocial well-being (Ellsberg et al., 2022; Nikupeteri et al., 2023). The argument advanced here is that survivors' continuing vulnerability reflects not only resource deprivation but also restricted capabilities shaped by institutional and social conditions (Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Davies et al., 2025). The availability of financial resources or legal solutions does not necessarily imply better well-being when survivors remain at risk, experience stigma, or have limited agency (Johnson et al., 2022). The capability approach, thus, offers a normative framework to assess whether institutional interventions genuinely increase the freedoms and life opportunities of survivors in the long run (Robeyns, 2017; Nikupeteri et al., 2023).

4.3 Social Protection as a Policy Mechanism

Social protection is used in this article as a policy mechanism that can support or limit survivor recovery after abuse and divorce. Cash assistance, legal aid, childcare support, housing assistance, health services, and labour market support can reduce immediate vulnerability and help rebuild economic security (Aubry et al., 2020; Sanhueza-Morales et al., 2025). However, these measures are discussed mainly in the policy implications section, because the central focus of the article is survivor well-being rather than social protection design in general.

4.4 Social Innovation Theory

Social innovation is treated here as a practical reform mechanism rather than a separate theoretical centre of the article. In the context of DV and post-abuse divorce, innovation refers to coordinated services, survivor-centred practice, safe routes to support, community accountability, and institutional redesign that reduces the burden placed on survivors to navigate fragmented systems (Colombini et al., 2017; Kulkarni, 2019; Sullivan, 2018). Its relevance lies in whether it improves safety, autonomy, emotional support, and long-term reintegration.

4.5 Integrating the Frameworks

These perspectives are integrated into an analytical model that connects structure, institutional process, and survivor well-being outcomes (Barrios et al., 2021; Cookson et al., 2024; Robeyns, 2017). Feminist institutionalism explains how gendered rules, norms, and organisational practices shape exposure to violence and access to protection. The capability approach provides a normative basis for assessing whether institutional responses expand survivors' real freedoms, including safety, autonomy, livelihood security, social and political participation, and psychosocial well-being. Social protection and social innovation are treated as policy and practice mechanisms that can support this capability restoration when they are coordinated, accessible, and survivor-centred. Together, these perspectives allow DV and post-abuse divorce to be analysed as dynamic processes in which institutions may either reproduce vulnerability or support long-term recovery.

5. Institutional Response Systems and Structural Gaps

Responses to DV and post-abuse divorce usually involve multiple sectors, including legal systems, welfare and social services, economic protection, psychosocial support, housing, and child protection (Hammervold et al., 2024; Childress et al., 2022; Dadhich et al., 2025). The core problem is not only that services may be insufficient, but that they are often organised through separate mandates, eligibility rules, and administrative procedures. Survivors may therefore encounter a system that recognises their needs in fragments rather than as connected dimensions of well-being and recovery.

5.1 Legal Systems

The laws that regulate DV and divorce determine survivors' access to protection orders, custody, maintenance, and property division (Dadhich et al., 2025). Nevertheless, access to justice is often restricted due to procedural complexity, high evidentiary requirements, and legal expenses, especially among financially disadvantaged survivors (Schweiger, 2025). Protection is further weakened by enforcement gaps and bias associated with reconciliation in courts, and mediation can favour marital preservation as opposed to safety (Cookson et al., 2024). Even in legal pluralism contexts, there are inconsistent outcomes due to overlapping civil, religious, and customary systems, which are a manifestation of underlying gendered power relations that are inherent in legal institutions (Dadhich et al., 2025). From a survivor's perspective, legal protection is therefore not only a matter of formal rights. It also depends on whether those rights can be accessed quickly, understood clearly, enforced consistently, and linked to practical support such as housing, income, childcare, and safety planning.

5.2 Welfare and Social Services

Welfare and social service systems can provide financial support, childcare, emergency assistance, and referrals. However, these responses are often disjointed across agencies (Husso et al., 2021). Survivors may

be required to complete repeated assessments and documentation before becoming eligible for assistance. These procedures can exclude those in precarious situations, particularly survivors with limited income, insecure housing, rural residence, or limited access to transport and legal information (Sanhueza-Morales et al., 2025; Youngson et al., 2021). This gap is especially important after divorce, when survivors may no longer be in immediate crisis but still require sustained support to rebuild income, housing, parenting arrangements, and social networks.

5.3 Economic Protection and Employment

To provide survivors with the opportunity to escape abusive relationships and be independent after a divorce, economic security is essential (Cortis et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022). Nevertheless, poor maintenance and child support enforcement, broken work records, parenting responsibilities, and labour markets limit economic reintegration (de Vaus et al., 2017; Leopold, 2018). Other obstacles to accessing financial services, such as gender-neutral labour policies, further ignore the special needs of the survivors (de Vaus et al., 2017). Consequently, divorce may produce downward mobility and deepen social exclusion when economic protection is weak, especially for survivors who carry both the costs of separation and the burden of caregiving (Högnäs, 2020; Johnson et al., 2022).

5.4 Psychosocial Support and Health Services

Health and psychosocial services are vital since DV has considerable physical and psychological effects. However, the current staff in these systems tend to be poorly trained and lack protocols to identify and intervene in cases of abuse. In addition, mental healthcare services are scarce, expensive, or unreachable (Zoie & Digal, 2026). Poor access to trauma-informed practices and cultural or linguistic obstacles might also limit access, especially for marginalised groups, making institutional support less effective (Sanhueza-Morales et al., 2025; Sullivan, 2018; Cortis et al., 2021).

5.5 Housing and Child Protection

Housing services are generally scarce, temporary, and short-term. The problem must be promptly addressed because stable housing is a fundamental need for survivors looking to leave abusive relationships (Hammervold et al., 2024; Davies et al., 2025). Another concern is that child protection systems can impose further difficulties, such as punishing the victims without considering the structural bottlenecks (Marçal & Maguire-Jack, 2021). The lack of coordination between housing, welfare, and child protection agencies also leads to the fragmentation of response, compromising long-term stability (Johnson et al., 2022).

6. Survivor-Centred Support, Prevention and System Coordination

In the context of DV and post-abuse divorce, institutional reform should be evaluated by whether it improves survivors' safety, emotional support, autonomy, social participation, and long-term reintegration. The emphasis is therefore not on innovation for its own sake, but on whether services reduce fragmentation and improve survivors' real access to support.

Coordinated service models, integrated centres, and coordinated community responses can reduce the burden placed on survivors to move repeatedly between legal, welfare, health, housing, and child protection agencies (Colombini et al., 2017; Bova, 2022; Osborn & Rajah, 2022). Such models are valuable when they provide timely referral, safe information sharing, continuity of support, and clear responsibility among institutions. Their main contribution is that survivors do not have to become the link between fragmented agencies while coping with trauma, financial insecurity, and continuing contact with the perpetrator.

Trauma-informed and survivor-centred practices are equally important. These approaches aim to minimise re-traumatisation, respect survivors' decisions, and recognise that emotional recovery, trust, and confidence are part of well-being (Davies et al., 2025; Kulkarni, 2019). Digital support, including hotlines, online counselling, and remote legal assistance, may widen access for survivors with childcare responsibilities, mobility constraints, geographic isolation, or fear of being seen at formal service locations.

However, digital support must be designed with attention to confidentiality, surveillance risk, data privacy, and digital literacy (Sabri et al., 2023; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Novitzky et al., 2023).

Prevention is also central to survivor well-being because institutional responses alone cannot fully address norms that legitimise control, silence survivors, or treat violence as a private family matter. Community prevention should therefore include awareness-raising, family-level dialogue, school and community education, and engagement with men, boys, religious leaders, local organisations, and survivor advocates. These initiatives should explicitly address power relations, gender ideologies, victim-blaming, emotional support, and pathways to formal and informal assistance. When prevention changes how families and communities respond to abuse, survivors may be more likely to seek support, receive emotional validation, and avoid isolation after separation or divorce.

Economic empowerment also remains important, but it should be understood as part of survivor well-being rather than as a standalone development programme. Skills training, employment support, financial inclusion, childcare assistance, and safe transport can reduce economic dependence and support recovery after divorce (Bova, 2022; Davies et al., 2025; Spearman et al., 2023). These measures are most effective when linked to protection, housing, psychosocial support, and community acceptance.

7. Developmental Outcomes and Survivor Well-Being

A social development perspective shifts the assessment of survivor recovery from whether violence has stopped in the immediate term to whether survivors can rebuild secure, meaningful, and autonomous lives over time. Recovery is therefore multidimensional. It depends on safety, economic stability, psychosocial health, social and political participation, housing security, emotional support, and the well-being of children. This section therefore places survivor well-being at the centre of the analysis.

7.1 Economic and Social Well-being

Long-term recovery should be based on the capacity of survivors to attain financial stability and re-enter social life (Högnäs, 2020; Van Winkle & Leopold, 2021). This includes access to secure income, stable housing, financial resources, and employment opportunities following divorce, particularly in the context of increased caregiving responsibilities and disrupted work histories (Hammervold et al., 2024; de Vaus et al., 2017; Leopold, 2018). Consistent child support, social transfers, and affordable childcare play a crucial role in long-term economic self-sufficiency (Högnäs, 2020).

Social reintegration is equally important. Survivors may need to rebuild relationships, restore trust, manage stigma, and re-enter community life while also managing childcare, legal processes, and financial pressure (Bova, 2022; Davies et al., 2025). Economic security and social participation are therefore mutually reinforcing. Financial autonomy can strengthen agency, while social support can reduce isolation and improve the prospects for sustained reintegration (Davies et al., 2025; Van Winkle & Leopold, 2021).

Social and political participation refers not only to formal political activity, but also to survivors' ability to participate safely in community life, access institutions, express needs, exercise legal rights, and be recognised as legitimate decision-makers in matters affecting their lives and children. After abuse and divorce, participation may be constrained by stigma, fear, economic dependence, caregiving burden, or continuing control by the former partner. Institutional responses that provide legal information, emotional support, peer networks, childcare, safe transport, and community acceptance can therefore improve survivors' participation and reduce isolation.

7.2 Psychosocial Well-being and Autonomy

DV can lead to severe psychological consequences, such as trauma, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem (Zoie & Digal, 2026). The process of long-term recovery presupposes not only the availability of mental health and psychosocial support but also an increase in survivors' sense of autonomy and decision-making power (Dadhich et al., 2025).

The argument here is that psychosocial well-being is closely connected to broader structural conditions because safe housing, reliable income, and supportive environments help survivors restore confidence and make meaningful decisions (Aubry et al., 2020; Martinelli, 2025). Autonomy is therefore not simply an individual psychological attribute. It is produced through external conditions that make meaningful choices

possible, including safe housing, reliable income, accessible services, supportive relationships, and institutional practices that respect survivors' decision-making. Sustainable recovery requires both internal confidence and external conditions that allow survivors to act on that confidence.

7.3 Intergenerational Outcomes

Recovery mechanisms of survivors are directly linked to the well-being of children and long-term life opportunities. Children may experience adverse effects on their psychological development, education, and social relationships because of exposure to DV and post-divorce instability. Nonetheless, safe separation, as well as stable caregiving environments and access to services, can considerably enhance the outcomes (Sullivan, 2018; Cortis et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2025).

A comprehensive approach to DV as a social development problem is therefore intergenerational because children's future opportunities are shaped by the economic, social, and psychosocial realities of survivors. Such interventions should consequently be effective in supporting both survivors and their children throughout the life course (Van Winkle & Leopold, 2021; Sullivan, 2018).

8. Proposed Integrated Social Development Model

The article proposes an integrated social development model that connects structural inequality, DV, post-abuse divorce, institutional responses, prevention, capability restoration, and long-term survivor well-being. The model (Figure 1) explains not only the consequences of DV and divorce, but also the mechanisms through which institutional arrangements may either deepen vulnerability or support recovery. It links three analytical layers: structural conditions, institutional interventions, and developmental outcomes conceptualised through the capability approach. The outcome layer includes safety and psychosocial well-being, economic security and capability, social and political participation, and child and family well-being.

8.1 Model Overview

The conceptualisation of the model was based on a pathway where structural inequality predisposes the development of DV and transitions to divorce (Berktaş & Eryurt, 2025; Wilcox et al., 2021). Institutional response systems mediate these experiences and can either alleviate or increase the vulnerability of survivors. In the process, social innovation is a redesign mechanism that allows capabilities to be restored and long-term well-being to be developed (Rose et al., 2024). Notably, the model was not linearly causal. Instead, it focused on dynamic, recursive relations, in which feedback processes between institutional structures, social conventions, and individualised outcomes reorganise risk and recovery paths.

The model advances five propositions. First, where legal, welfare, housing, and child protection systems remain fragmented, post-divorce vulnerability is likely to persist even when formal protection mechanisms exist. Second, interventions that combine safety, economic security, psychosocial support, emotional support, and social reintegration are more likely to restore survivors' capabilities than crisis-only responses. Third, survivor well-being depends not only on the availability of services but also on coordination, accessibility, continuity, and respect for autonomy. Fourth, social and political participation improves when survivors can access institutions, exercise rights, rebuild networks, and participate safely in family and community life. Fifth, intergenerational outcomes improve when interventions address the survivor's safety, income, housing, and children's educational and psychosocial continuity as connected rather than separate concerns.

8.2 Structural Conditions

The initial layer included structural circumstances that create vulnerability to DV. These were gendered institutional structures and the legitimising culture, precarity due to divisions in the labour market, and the unequal distribution of legal and welfare protection (Igiebor, 2023). Additional social hierarchies mediate exposure to violence and access to support (Hammervold et al., 2024; Hulley et al., 2023; Martinelli, 2025). DV is, therefore, not conceptualised as an episodic interpersonal phenomenon, but as a systemic manifestation of structural inequality.



Figure 1. Integrated social development model of domestic violence and post-abuse divorce trajectories: Linking structural inequality, institutional intervention, social innovation, capability restoration, and long-term survivor well-being.

Note. The model illustrates how structural inequality shapes domestic violence and post-abuse divorce transitions, while institutional interventions, prevention, and survivor-centred support may either reduce or reproduce vulnerability. Developmental outcomes are understood through survivors' safety and psychosocial well-being, economic security and capability, social and political participation, and child and family well-being.

8.3 Institutional Interventions

The second level looks at institutional reactions that influence the outcomes of DV and divorce. These include legal regimes, social protection and welfare provision, health and psychosocial assistance, housing and child protection, as well as community or religious institutions that affect the resolution of disputes and normative expectations (Aubry et al., 2020; Hammervold et al., 2024; Marçal & Maguire-Jack, 2021).

The model was based on feminist institutionalism and, therefore, questions how the institutional structure reproduces or alleviates gendered inequalities. Social innovation theory, in its turn, determines ways of institutional change. Mechanisms such as integrated service delivery, multi-agency response, and trauma-informed, survivor-centred approaches make the delivery more effective and accessible. Complementary innovations, such as digital platforms, economic empowerment programmes, and community accountability systems, expand access to resources and reorganise power dynamics. In this sense, the model can be used diagnostically. It helps identify where a survivor's recovery pathway breaks down: legal recognition, welfare eligibility, safe accommodation, psychosocial support, economic reintegration, child protection, or community acceptance. This diagnostic function is important because institutional failure rarely occurs in one sector alone. It often emerges through gaps between sectors.

8.4 Developmental Outcomes

The third layer concerns developmental outcomes, assessed through the capability approach. Core dimensions include bodily safety, economic capability, secure livelihoods, housing stability, social participation, voice, and psychosocial well-being (Bartolomei et al., 2024). Intergenerational outcomes are also central, particularly children's access to education, health, stable caregiving, and violence-free environments (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023; Schweiger, 2025). A social protection and human development perspective helps clarify how welfare regimes may either facilitate or inhibit these capabilities over time.

8.5 Dynamics and Feedback Loops

The model also emphasises feedback loops between structural conditions, institutional responses, and developmental outcomes. When interventions restore safety, income, housing, and social participation, survivors may be better positioned to rebuild agency, participate in community life, and contribute to wider social change. Conversely, when institutions are fragmented, delayed, or inaccessible, they may reproduce cycles of dependency, exclusion, and continued exposure to harm. These dynamics are intergenerational: the conditions that shape survivor recovery also affect children's educational continuity, psychosocial stability, and future life opportunities. The model therefore suggests that DV cannot be addressed only through protective legal measures. It also requires long-term institutional reform that expands substantive freedoms and supports durable well-being (Rose et al., 2024).

9. Policy and Development Implications

The integrated social development model emphasises the importance of multi-level and aligned policy responses to DV and post-abuse divorce. Policy effectiveness should be assessed not only by the number of cases processed or services delivered, but by whether survivors experience safer living conditions, stable income, secure housing, psychosocial recovery, emotional support, stronger decision-making power, social and political participation, reduced isolation, and improved prospects for their children. These outcomes provide a more realistic basis for judging whether institutional responses have supported well-being and recovery rather than merely managed crisis.

9.1 Integrated Governance and Institutional Reform

Governments need to strengthen governance systems that coordinate legal, welfare, health, housing, and community responses. This requires clear institutional mandates, inter-agency coordination frameworks, sustainable funding, and safe information-sharing procedures (Sullivan, 2018; Cortis et al., 2021; Colombini et al., 2017). Institutional capacity should also be strengthened through regular training in gender-sensitive and trauma-informed practice (Kulkarni, 2019). Monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be survivor-centred and should assess safety, dignity, continuity of support, and long-term well-being rather than administrative outputs alone.

9.2 Survivor-Centred Welfare Policy

Welfare systems should recognise survivors as rights-holders and active decision-makers rather than passive beneficiaries (Byrt et al., 2025; Johnson et al., 2022). Individually titled benefits, flexible eligibility rules, emergency cash support, childcare assistance, and legal aid can reduce the risk that survivors remain

economically dependent on abusive partners. Separation or divorce should not create welfare penalties or gaps in support during the period when survivors are most vulnerable (Thielemans & Mortelmans, 2022). Integrating legal assistance, childcare, housing, and employment support into welfare pathways would strengthen the possibility of independent and sustainable livelihoods (Byrt et al., 2025; Aubry et al., 2020).

Social protection should be positioned as a practical policy tool within this wider response. Emergency cash support, individually accessible benefits, childcare assistance, housing support, legal aid, and employment-linked services can reduce the economic pressure that often keeps survivors dependent on abusive partners or vulnerable after divorce. These supports should be flexible enough to respond to post-separation risk, caregiving responsibilities, documentation barriers, and the time required to rebuild livelihoods.

9.3 Long-Term Reintegration and Economic Capability

Responses to DV and post-abuse divorce should not end at crisis intervention. Sustainable recovery requires long-term reintegration strategies that strengthen economic capability, housing stability, and social participation (Aubry et al., 2020). This includes permanent or transitional housing, multi-year economic empowerment programmes, skills development, job placement, financial inclusion, and support for childcare and transport (Van Winkle & Leopold, 2021; Aubry et al., 2020).

Strengthening economic capability also requires attention to labour market barriers faced by divorced women, single mothers, and survivors with disrupted work histories. Inclusive employment policies, anti-discrimination measures, flexible work arrangements, and asset-building initiatives may help reduce the risk of downward mobility after divorce (Byrt et al., 2025; Kulkarni, 2019). Survivor-led organisations and peer-support networks can further reduce isolation and strengthen collective agency.

9.4 Community Prevention and Norm Change

Policy responses must also address the socio-cultural norms that sustain DV and stigmatise divorce after abuse (Rose et al., 2024). Community-based prevention programmes should involve men and boys, religious leaders, educators, local organisations, family members, and survivor advocates in challenging norms that justify violence, silence victims, or prioritise family preservation over safety (Rose et al., 2024; Nikupeteri et al., 2023; Schweiger, 2025). These efforts should explicitly address power relations within families, gender ideologies, victim-blaming, emotional support, and the practical routes through which survivors can access formal and informal assistance. Educational programmes that promote gender equality, respectful relationships, non-violent conflict resolution, and early awareness among young people are particularly important for long-term attitudinal change (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023).

10. Implications for Research

The proposed social development model opens several directions for future research, particularly studies that examine DV and post-abuse divorce as linked processes rather than isolated events. Future work should pay closer attention to time, institutional context, intersectionality, and survivor participation.

Research on survivor well-being should avoid treating service access as equivalent to recovery. Future studies should examine whether institutional interventions improve concrete well-being outcomes such as safety, psychosocial recovery, housing stability, economic capability, social and political participation, emotional support, and children's continuity of care. This would strengthen the quality-of-life contribution of the field and provide clearer evidence for policy reform.

10.1 Longitudinal Studies on Post-Divorce Well-being

Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are needed to track survivors' trajectories after separation and divorce. Such studies can show how safety, income, housing, social support, and psychosocial well-being change over time, and how institutional support either strengthens or weakens recovery (Davies et al., 2025). This would move the literature beyond crisis-based accounts of vulnerability toward a life-course understanding of recovery, capability restoration, and intergenerational well-being (Rose et al., 2024).

10.2 Evaluation of Social Innovation Programmes

Future research should rigorously assess social innovation initiatives such as integrated service models, coordinated response systems, digital assistance platforms, and economic empowerment programmes (Van Winkle & Leopold, 2021). Evaluations should examine not only whether these programmes increase access, but whether they improve safety, psychosocial well-being, economic stability, service continuity, cost-effectiveness, and scalability. Attention should also be given to unintended consequences, especially where digital tools, inter-agency data sharing, or mandatory reporting may create new risks for survivors (Sanhueza-Morales et al., 2025).

10.3 Intersectionality in Development Trajectories

Future research should be explicitly intersectional in its approach to studying the interaction of gender with class, ethnicity, migration status, disability, and legal status in the experiences of violence and post-divorce outcomes (Novitzky et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Martinelli, 2025). These analyses may expose compounded vulnerabilities, inform targeted interventions, and challenge standardised policy approaches.

10.4 Comparative Institutional Analysis

International and institutional comparative research can also be used to gain an understanding of the impact of various forms of governance and welfare regimes on the capabilities of survivors (Steinbacher, 2024). This involves looking into differences in legal frameworks, the level of centralisation of welfare, and institutional alignment (Byrt et al., 2025; Steinbacher, 2024). This kind of work can find enabling conditions for good policy design and scale-up of social innovations (Mir et al., 2024).

10.5 Survivor-Led and Participatory Research

Greater attention should also be given to participatory and survivor-led research (Davies et al., 2025; Kulkarni, 2019). Involving survivors in research design, interpretation, and dissemination can produce more grounded insights and reduce the risk that institutional solutions are designed from the perspective of service providers alone. Such approaches may improve ethical practice, policy relevance, and the social impact of research.

11. Conclusion

This article has argued that DV and post-abuse divorce should be understood not only as private crises or legal transitions, but also as social development challenges shaped by structural inequality, institutional design, and unequal access to protection. By integrating feminist institutionalism, the capability approach, and social development perspectives, the article offers a framework for explaining how vulnerability is produced, mediated, and potentially transformed across institutional settings. The proposed model highlights that survivor recovery depends on more than immediate safety. It also requires stable housing, economic security, psychosocial support, emotional support, social and political participation, and continuity of care for children.

The central implication is that fragmented systems are unlikely to produce sustained recovery, even when individual services are available. More effective responses require coordinated institutions that reduce bureaucratic burden, protect autonomy, support prevention, and connect crisis intervention with long-term reintegration. Conceptually, the article contributes a structured way to analyse DV and post-abuse divorce as linked processes of exclusion, capability restoration, and survivor well-being.

Declarations

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Nature of the study: This study is a conceptual study based on existing literature and theoretical synthesis. It is not a systematic literature review, scoping review, meta-analysis, or empirical study. The purpose of the paper is to develop and discuss a conceptual model grounded in relevant literature.

Use of generative AI and AI-assisted tools: Generative AI and AI-assisted tools were used only to support language fluency, grammar refinement, and the development or enhancement of visual diagrams or illustrative figures. These tools were not used to conduct analysis, perform calculations, generate research findings, formulate conclusions, or replace the authors' scholarly judgment. All conceptual arguments, interpretations, model development, and final conclusions were reviewed, verified, and approved by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and scholarly content of the manuscript.

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