

# Shackled by Patriarchy and Poverty: Women's Experiences with Domestic Violence in North Central Timor and North Sumatra<sup>1</sup>

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*Received:* 21 October 2020 | *Accepted:* 15 January 2021 | *Published:* 22 January 2021

## Abstract

*This article discusses how patriarchal elements of society and culture, in conjunction with poverty, is necessary to comprehend the domestic violence experienced by women. This article departs from a qualitative case study of the experiences of women in Taekas Village, North Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara, and Pondok Batu Village, Labuhanbatu, North Sumatra, and seeks to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of how patriarchy and poverty contribute to domestic violence. This article emphasizes that, although domestic violence knows no class, religious, or geographical boundaries, rural women who live in poverty are more vulnerable to domestic violence. This article is hoped to shed light on domestic violence in Indonesia, thereby increasing awareness and providing further impetus for eradicating said practice.*

**Keywords:** domestic violence, women, patriarchal culture, poverty

## Background

*"There was this one time, when my husband and I were fighting about money. He hit me, then kicked me strongly in the back. I still remember... for three months, I could only lie down. To leave the room, I had to crawl. I don't know why I didn't divorce him from the beginning." – Gani (age 40),*

mother of two children, Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra.

Gani's experience with domestic violence is but one of many such cases in Indonesia. Data from the National Commission for Women (Komisi Perempuan Nasional, Komnas Perempuan) indicates that 348,446 cases of violence against women were reported in 2018; of these, 335,062 were cases of domestic

<sup>1</sup> The data in this article is collected through MAMPU, The University of Melbourne, and Universitas Gadjah Mada research project, "Forging Pathways for Gender-Inclusive Development in Rural Indonesia: Case Studies of Women's Collective Action and Influence on Village Law Implementation" in 2019.

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violence that resulted in divorce. The Commission's annual report for 2018 found that women often experience domestic violence 'behind closed doors', within the private sphere; domestic violence and dating violence accounted for approximately 71% of cases. More cases of domestic are reported every year; however, these reports fail to provide a comprehensive portrait of the reality of domestic violence in Indonesia.

Domestic violence in Indonesia remains as an iceberg phenomenon, with only a minority of all cases reported and publicly known. Owing to public taboos against discussing household issues, many women are afraid to discuss their experiences or report their abusers (WHO, 2009). Further exacerbating this issue is victim blaming culture, widespread both amongst general society and authorities, which results in women having difficulty in accessing appropriate services and finding necessary protections. Domestic violence does not recognize social class, ethnicity, religion, or location; all women are vulnerable.

Dobash and Dobash (1979) describe violence against women, including domestic violence, as a by-product of patriarchal culture. Patriarchal culture shackles women in both their public and private lives. According to Walby (1990), patriarchy refers to the aggregate values and concepts that justify men's dominance over women, and is often enforced and implemented through violence. The power disparities inherent to patriarchal culture are clearly evident, for example, in the household (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Patriarchal culture is one factor that contributes to the perpetuation of domestic violence. In many cases, it is significantly informed by women's class and socio-

economic situation. World Health Organisation (WHO) research found that violence is particularly problematic amongst the economically vulnerable (WHO, 2002). Similarly, in the 2016 Survey of Violence against Women and Children in Indonesia, approximately 32.4% of respondents identified financial problems as the primary trigger (Utami, 2006). This survey also found that domestic violence is more common in rural areas than in urban ones. In rural areas, financial difficulties and socio-cultural pressures make it difficult for women to escape abusive relationships. Even after divorce, women may remain trapped below the poverty line; one study found that divorced and widowed women in rural Indonesia are far more likely to live below the poverty line than any other segment of society (Schaner, 2012). Furthermore, when violence occurs, women in rural areas have limited access to public services such as safehouses and hospitals (Eastman, Williams & Carawan, 2007).

Such findings have driven the researcher to expose rural Indonesian women's experiences with domestic violence. In doing so, it uses the cases of Taekas Village, North Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, and Pondok Batu Village, Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra. These villages were selected owing to their high levels of violence against women and children, as a result of which they have often been targeted for government and civil society programs designed to curb domestic violence (MAMPU, 2019). Previously, cases of domestic violence had been reported in both villages. However, owing to social taboos that limit women's ability to discuss their experiences, information on their intensity and victims was lacking. Interviews found that women experience both physical and psychological violence.

Geographically, both villages are located at the edge of their respective districts (Taekas is located 5.7 km/15–20 minutes from its district seat, while Pondok Bantu is located 19.6 km/30–45 minutes from its district seat). These villages remain reliant on agriculture. Owing to their relative isolation they lack access to public services, such as those designed to protect women, and thus victims often have trouble accessing appropriate protections.

These villages were also selected due to their distinct cultural characteristics. Taekas, in North Central Timor, has a relatively homogenous society. Residents adhere to social values that are rooted in Timorese customs and Catholic religious norms. All residents of Taekas are Catholic, and the majority are Timorese in heritage. Meanwhile, the social structure of Pondok Batu Village, in Labuhanbatu, is relatively heterogeneous. Residents are predominantly of Javanese and Batak heritage. The majority are Muslim (63%), with a sizeable Christian minority (25%); other religions are also present. Drawing on these villages' experiences with domestic violence, this article will discuss how the social values, religious norms, and economic conditions shape and even influence the practice of violence against women.

This study employs a qualitative case study approach. The qualitative method was selected for its major strength: its ability to provide in-depth exploration and written description. Case studies, meanwhile, were chosen to better explore the dynamics of violence against women in the selected villages. Primary data were collected in June, July, and October 2019, through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation. Fieldwork and primary data

collection were conducted under the umbrella of the MAMPU research project, held by the University of Melbourne in conjunction with Universitas Gajah Mada. Secondary data were collected through a review of the literature, including local government reports.

This article is divided into several sections. The first section provides the background to the study and reviews the relevant literature. In the second section, data collected in the field are presented, first from Taekas Village and second from Pondok Batu Village. The third section will comparatively discuss and analyse the findings. Finally, the fourth section provides this study's conclusions.

### **Patriarchy: Social Values, Religious Norms, and Poverty contributing to Domestic Violence**

This article's main goal is to obtain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of how the patriarchy and poverty contribute to domestic violence. It emphasizes that, although domestic violence does not recognize social class, ethnicity, religion, or location, rural women who live in poverty are most vulnerable.

### ***Understanding Domestic Violence***

It must first be acknowledged that domestic violence is a complex issue that is influenced by a range of factors (Summers & Hoffman, 2002). Domestic violence covers various forms of physical violence, sexual violence, and economic violence, as well as psychological intimidation and assault perpetrated against one's intimate partner (Ganley, 2008; Lockton, 1997; Mullender, 1996). Such violence may also be understood as a

means of coercively proving a husband's power, dominance, and control of his wife (Litke, 1992); it thus reflects a series of complex power dynamics (Easteal, 2001). Although the term domestic violence can also be used to refer to various forms of interfamilial violence, including violence against children and the elderly, this article focuses on acts of violence perpetrated by husbands against their wives.

Records of domestic violence may be traced back to the 15th century, when husbands justified the use of violence to force their wives to behave as desired (Mullender, 1996). Such acts of violence were commonly used by men as 'punishment' for wives' failure to meet their expectations, perceived as men's prerogative as husbands, and used to assert men's superiority (Dobash & Dobash, 1981). Research has shown that domestic violence is gendered, with women more commonly falling victim to abuse than men (Graycar & Morgan, 2002). Geographically, domestic violence is endemic and commonplace around the world; it knows no racial, cultural, or economic bounds.

For instance, in 2016–2017 Australia recorded 4,600 cases of women requiring inpatient hospital care after experiencing domestic violence; this represented a 23% increase from 2014 (AIHW, 2019). In India, two in five married women between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced domestic violence (Kishor & Gupta, 2009). According to the National Health Survey, in 2005, approximately 35% of married women between the ages of 15 and 49 reported physical violence; 81% reported that they had experienced such violence within five years of marriage (Kishor & Gupta, 2009). According to the Office of National Statistics, in England and Wales two women are killed by their partners

(married or non-married) every week (ONS, 2018).

### ***Influence of Patriarchal Culture on Domestic Violence***

Dobash & Dobash (1979) describe physical violence against women as the most brutal and explicit expression of the patriarchy. In this, the patriarchy's dominance is often supported by local value structures, cultural customs, and moral standards that reinforce men's dominance over women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and ultimately result in power gaps and disparate relations (Eleanora & Supriyanto, 2020). As a result, women are often unable to escape abusive relationships and the cycle of violence. When women do attempt to escape their subordination, they are commonly perceived as behaving immorally, inappropriately, and abrogating the respect and owner owed to their husbands (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Violence is often reinforced, both structurally and ideologically, by patriarchal culture. Patriarchal elements are manifested within institutional hierarchies and within social relationships; individuals of specific backgrounds and classes (i.e. men) are given special rights, powers, and leadership roles, and thus positioned as deserving obeisance (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Men are ideologically positioned as deserving and wielding control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Structurally, meanwhile, women are subordinated in their everyday interactions with men (Walby, 1990). Such subordination is reinforced by the institutions of marriage and family. Titles such as "wife of" and "daughter of" follow women throughout their lives, shape public

expectations of them, and filter society's understanding of their "womanhood". Wives, similarly, are framed as the property of their husbands, and are thus secondary in the hierarchy of marriage. Morally and legally, wives are expected to behave as expected and desired by their husbands, and this further reinforces their framing as the objects of their husbands' control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Such disparate power relations ultimately contribute to domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Institutionalized within the patriarchal family structure and shaped by patriarchal economic, political, and belief systems, power disparity between husbands and wives is viewed as natural and morally just—and even as sacral (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). For instance, one study of violence against women in Muna, Southeast Sulawesi, found that the disparate gender relations are manifested through dominance, subordination, marginalization, discrimination, and violence experienced by women is influenced simultaneously by the strong patriarchal culture and by economic factors (Obie, 2018). These conditions are exacerbated by the public perception that domestic issues are private ones, and thus inappropriate topics of outside discussion or intervention; as a result, many women have difficulty discussing their experiences (Dobash & Dobash, 1981).

A cross cultural study of traditional societies has found that domestic violence against wives is commonplace, and its intensity is strongly informed by social and structural factors (Ganley, 2008). Similar findings were made by Buzawa and Buzawa (1990), who show that sexual inequality and violence against women are influenced by social and cultural factors.

Domestic violence is commonly used by communities to emphasize men's control of women. For instance, in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Iran, dowries are commonly used to control women, and associated violence. This has produced what is known as dowry deaths: the deaths of married women, either by suicide or murder, often justified by the payment of dowries. Rather than honouring brides and their families, as initially intended, dowries have become seen as a means of 'buying' wives and gaining 'ownership' of their lives. Dobash and Dobash (1981) write that such violence tends to receive ideological and institutional support, both within the family and within the patriarchal society. Such traditions remain particularly strong amongst members of the lower economic class, whose financial instability results in unpredictability (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

### ***Influence of Economic Factors***

Economic factors also contribute to domestic violence. According to Goode (1971), individuals without power (income, education, employment) are more likely to use violence to gain control of their relationships (in Moe & Bell, 2004). A study conducted by WHO in 2002 showed that poverty is the greatest factor contributing to violence in intimate relations (WHO, 2002). It also found that women from lower socio-economic classes were more vulnerable to domestic violence (WHO, 2002). Studies by Zorza (1994) and Kurz (1995) found that domestic violence is a major factor contributing to homelessness among women. Kurz (1995) also shows a positive correlation between the intensity of women's poverty and the intensity of the violence they experience; the worse the poverty, the worse the violence (Kurz, 1995).

In *Beyond Gender: Class, Poverty and Domestic Violence*, Evans (2005) shows a complex relationship between domestic violence, class, and poverty. Evans finds that higher levels of poverty and class distinction results in women experiencing higher levels of violence. WHO's 2002 report *Violence and Health Laporan* similarly found that poverty is the largest factor contributing to violence, including 'violence in intimate relationships'. It found that levels of domestic violence were nine times higher in 'centres of poverty' such as urban ghettos than in more prosperous areas. Through a comprehensive review, Straus (1991) similarly found that the intensity of domestic violence is inversely correlated with class.

In *Women's Economic Inequality and Domestic Violence: Exploring the Links and Empowering Women*, Hughes, Bolis, Fries, and Finigan (2015) provide a theoretical and conceptual understanding of how micro-finance institutions, conditional cash transfers, and employment can transform household power relations, and this has implications for domestic violence (Hughes, Bolis, Fries, & Finigan, 2015). The authors recognize that poverty and gender inequality are related, and show that women are more vulnerable to poverty and economic instability than men. As such, the economic empowerment of women can reduce their risk of experiencing domestic violence. Although the relationship between women's economic empowerment and domestic violence is a complex one, being highly contextual and informed by the specific characteristics of various empowerment projects, addressing economic disparity ultimately has a positive influence on gender equality and reduces violence against women (Hughes, Bolis, Fries, & Finigan, 2015).

Eastman, Williams, and Carawan (2007) likewise show that poverty contributes to domestic violence, intensifying stress and hindering victims' efforts to escape abusive relationships. A study conducted by Logan et al. (2001) similarly found a correlation between poverty and violence against women, which was particularly strong in impoverished rural areas. A study conducted by SMERU in North Sumatra, Central Java, West Kalimantan, Southeast Sulawesi, and East Nusa Tenggara similarly found that poverty and limited access exacerbated gender disparity within the household, thereby making domestic violence more likely. Cases of domestic violence frequently occur when main breadwinners (most commonly husbands) are unable to provide for their families (SMERU, 2019).

### **Domestic Violence in Taekas Village**

Social norms in Taekas Village limit women's capacity to become involved in the public sphere, as they are expected to orient their everyday activities towards their families. Although women are not precluded from becoming involved in their communities, their activities tend to be oriented towards improving family welfare. For example, many are included in Family Welfare and Empowerment (Pemberdayaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, PKK) and Women Farmers' Groups (Kelompok Wanita Tani, KWT). In Timorese tradition, women are expected to handle household duties such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for their children, parents(-in-law), and husbands. From a young age, women learn these mindsets and duties from their mothers, and over generations said mindsets and duties have shaped ideal Timorese womanhood (interview with Veronika, 30 June 2019).

Strong Catholic norms also inform Timorese understandings of family, including the perception that the family institution is a sacred one (interview with Father Gabriel, 29 June 2019). Outside the home, many women are actively involved in church activities, often forming small groups for religious activities such as Bible studies and choir practice. Nonetheless, their lives are still centred around their families. In the Timorese system, men must be honoured and respected as the heads of their households, while women must act as caretakers and followers (interview with Athalia, 6 July 2019). Men commonly use violence to maintain control of and power over their wives.

In Taekas, rampant poverty has limited the employment opportunities available to both men and women. According to data from Statistics Indonesia, approximately 56,940 North Central Timorese (22.45% of the regency's population) lived below the poverty line in 2019 (BPS TTU, 2019). As such, women have been driven to seek employment to financially support their families. Most work in agriculture, cultivating crops (corn, tubers, and jackfruit) or raising cattle. Other residents of Taekas make and sell food and drink products such as ginger wine and palm oil. One litre of ginger wine sells for Rp 15,000.

Outside harvest season, some women weave traditional textiles known as *ikat*. Weaving is an important Timorese tradition, one that has been maintained for centuries. Traditional textiles may sell from Rp 250,000 to Rp 2,500,000, or even more, depending on their colour and the complexity of their patterns. Such textiles can provide families with an important source of income; however, weaving is a lengthy and time-consuming process.

Furthermore, owing to intergenerational gaps and changes in living conditions, many young women lack the necessary skills. As such, younger women are limited to collecting natural dyes from the forest or selling textiles elsewhere.

It may thus be concluded that the average household in Taekas Village ranges between Rp 500,000 and Rp 1,500,000/month. Approximately 60% of this income is used to cover everyday household expenses; the remaining 40% is allocated for education and other expenses. Economic conditions often force parents to dedicate themselves to working or sell their cattle to pay for their children's education. As education is perceived as a luxury, opportunities for education are limited to male children. Before the 1990s, it was rare for female children to attend school. It was held that educating daughters was a waste of time and money, as ultimately they would only be limited to domestic activities.

The strength of the social and religious norms that limit women to the domestic sphere has strongly informed the character of domestic violence in Taekas, including its continued secrecy. At the surface, no culture of violence is evident, as acts are perpetrated behind closed doors. Many women, when asked about domestic violence, indicate that they have never experienced such problems. They assert that domestic violence is not an issue in the village.

Nonetheless, in 2018, the Amnaut Bife Kuan (Yabiku) Foundation responded to six cases in the village (Yabiku, 2018). These were only reported cases; many other instances occurred below the radar. In interviews, many women indicated that they would not seek aid if they were to experience domestic violence, but would

rather discuss it with their husbands or their families. Some indicated that they would discuss the matter with their *mama* and *papa serani*.<sup>3</sup> Discussing matters outside the household would be seen as taboo. For them, domestic violence is a personal problem, and thus must be resolved within the family. As such, women generally feel ashamed to discuss matters with outsiders. Similarly, many women indicated that they were unwilling to become involved in their neighbours' households, as they believed that it was inappropriate to become involved in others' personal affairs (interview with Esther and Kristine, 3 July 2019).

Owing to this situation, women tend to normalize violence within the family. Disparate male–female power relations have become ensconced in Timorese culture, and thus they are not recognized or acknowledged by most women. An FGD with KWT members found that women in Taekas had varied views of the relationship between men and women, as well as the violence that occurs. They recognize both 'refined' and 'severe' abuse and violence. The former, which includes verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and light blows, is perceived as 'normal'.

*"A slap across the head, a small blow, that's normal for us. Shouting and cursing during fights, that's also normal. So long as there is no blood, no bruising, we will see it as normal living rather than domestic violence."* – Christiana, KTW member (Taekas, 2 July 2019).

Many of the women understood 'severe' abuse as domestic violence that leaves the victim bruised or bleeding (FGD

<sup>3</sup> In Timorese Catholic tradition, the *mama* and *papa serani* are a married couple chosen by newlyweds to witness their marriage and guide

KWT, 2 July 2019). Physical wounds are understood as the sole evidence of violence. Blows that do not leave such wounds are not perceived as acts of violence.

Aside from physical violence, men's control over women is also symbolically evidenced through the Timorese dowry tradition (*belis*). Although this tradition was initially intended to honour women, in recent years there has been a shift in public understanding (interview with Father Gabriel, 29 June 2019). Certain beliefs have become normalized; this includes, for instance, the adage "Once the dowry is paid, we surrender the rattan to the husband" (interview with Father Gabriel, 29 June 2019). In this adage, the rattan is understood as indicating power and ownership. Not only does it indicate that husbands are responsible for guiding their wives, but it also provides social legitimization for violence against women. Meanwhile, women tend to view violence as a valid response to their failure to fulfil the needs of their husbands and children. They thus normalize abuse as a means of teaching them to become better wives (FGD KWT, 2 July 2019).

In the CNT, the Church has recognized domestic violence as a social problem with severe detrimental effects on women. Pastors provide women with advice for dealing with domestic violence. However, they do not directly advocate for separation or divorce. At most, they will urge women to spend time apart from their husbands to address these problems (interview with Father Gabriel, 29 June 2019).

them in domestic life. As such, they may be consulted to discuss marital or family issues.



Ultimately, Church-led consultation and rehabilitation services cannot guarantee the transformation or cessation of domestic violence, and many women are trapped within the cycle of violence. Annulment processes are difficult, and only permitted without verification where the marriage itself is inherently flawed (for example, if either spouse is infertile). In all other cases, the Church must investigate the claim, which requires a significant amount of time. It is thus inappropriate for cases of domestic violence, which require immediate action and response (interview with pastor, 6 July 2019).

### Domestic Violence in Pondok Batu Village

Social norms in Pondok Batu strictly distinguish between men and women in their division of domestic labour. Men are expected to work outside the household and support their families, while women are tasked with handling domestic affairs. Women's domestic roles are constructed and narrated as part of ideal womanhood. Interviewees in Pondok Batu explained that domestic labour and childcare were their duty and their obligation (interview with Soemiyati and Uwak Titi, 12 October 2019). It would be considered strange for men to be involved in childcare.

Many women also face a double burden, being expected to support their families' finances by working outside the home. Often, Pondok Batu's women work as day labourers in the palm oil plantations that surround the village, receiving Rp 100,000 for five hours of work.

Some women leave Pondok Batu to find employment as domestic workers in

Medan, the provincial capital. When doing so, however, they face significant stigma, being branded 'easy women' (i.e. prostitutes). One informant explained that, after deciding to seek employment in Medan, her neighbours accused her of irresponsibly abandoning her children and even of selling herself (interview with Soemiyati, 12 October 2019). Owing to such stigmas, it is difficult for women in Pondok Batu to find employment elsewhere. Several women involved in the Independent Women's Union of Pondok Batu (Serika Pekerja Independen, Pondok Batu) indicated that, before seeking outside employment, they had to give their husbands 'their share'<sup>4</sup> before receiving permission to leave. In such cases, children were left with their husbands (interview with Yuli, 13 October 2019).

*"Yeah, they say... 'Go, give your husband his share. So he'll let you join our meeting. Only afterwards can my friends and I join SPI activities in the City'" – Yuli (Chair of SPI Pondok Batu, 13 October 2019).*

Women are driven to seek employment outside the home owing to significant financial pressures (interview with Soemiyati, Inem, and Siti, 14 October 2019). Often, they are economically neglected by their husbands, and thus must seek an alternative income to ensure household needs are met. Women's frustration with their role serving others is compounded by their fear of their husbands (interview with Gani and Larasati, 17 October 2019). Men hold power both in the household and in society, being the primary decision makers; women are positioned in a subordinate supporting role

sexual/intimate relations between husbands and wives.

<sup>4</sup> In Indonesian, *jatah*. In Pondok Batu Village, this euphemism is commonly used to refer to

(interview with Tari, 13 October 2019). This is used to justify the perpetration of violence, both physical and psychological, against women. One informant indicated that she had experienced severe violence and financial neglect; however, as her husband was a respected member of the community, and was active in mosque activities, few believed her (interview with Gani, 17 October 2019).

For the women of Pondok Batu, domestic violence covers not only physical violence, but also emotional abuse and financial neglect. Several women indicated that their husbands had never provided them with the money to fulfil their household needs (interview with Larasati, Gani, and Ani, 17 October 2019). One woman's husband travelled outside the province and severed all communications. She was thus abandoned, without a formal divorce or even any knowledge of her husband's whereabouts.

Pondok Batu society associates childcare and domestic labour with women's work. Members of the community also hold that men have the right to control their wives, who must obey. This permeates all aspects of everyday life in Pondok Batu; women must be available for sexual intercourse, serve their husbands, and ensure their wellbeing.

*"Men feel as though they have a rightful authority over women. For instance, when they want conjugal relations, it is their right, and women must obey. It does not matter whether the woman has just given birth, or is menstruating... she must serve her husband. And this is a mistaken belief."* – Tari (Deputy Chair of SPI Pondok Batu and Chair of LBK, 13 October 2019).

Other common forms of neglect include divorce and extramarital affairs, the

latter of which was experienced by almost all of the informants interviewed. Often, such extramarital affairs are precursors to violence against women, financial neglect, and ultimately divorce. Where such affairs occur, it is common for the women to be blamed; men's behaviours are often justified with claims that "the wife failed to care for her husband", that "the wife should have made herself up better, so her husband was proud and not ashamed", or that "the wife complained too much" (interviews with Tari, 13 October 2019, and Ani, 17 October 2019). Although such affairs involve both men and women, it is the women who are blamed.

*"Of the victims I've helped, mostly, when husbands and wives fight and fail to resolve their differences, the men leave the home and find another woman. One couple we helped, the wife had tried her best to serve her husband and to fulfil his needs, whatever they were, and he still cheated."* – Tari (Deputy Chair of SPI and Chair of LBK, 13 October 2019).

Violence against women in Pondok Batu Village is further complicated by alcohol and drug abuse (FGD with Village Administrators, 16 October 2019). When husbands become addicted to such substances, they are often unable to control their urges. When their wives are unable to satisfy them, they may experience violence. Alcoholism also contributes to violence against women.

Domestic violence and extramarital affairs are the two main causes of divorce in Pondok Batu Village (FGD with Village Administrators, 16 October 2019). Many of Pondok Batu's women have divorced at least once and then remarried (of the ten interviewees, five had been divorced and remarried at least once). Data from the Rantaupraptat Religious Court indicates

that 30% of divorces cited financial neglect in 2016 (PA Rantauprat, 2016).

Further violence against women is evident in the practice of child marriage, which is widespread not only in Pondok Batu Village but throughout Labuhanbatu Regency. The prevalence of the practice was confirmed through interviews; informants indicated that they had married between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Child marriage is particularly prevalent owing to the widespread belief that it ensures social acceptance of young couples. However, new couples lack of knowledge regarding marriage and related values contributes to violence against women (interview with Liana and Hanna, 22 October 2019).

## Discussion

The violence experienced by the women of Taekas and Pondok Batu Village is influenced by cultural and economic factors. In Taekas, the homogeneous social and religious values of society have contributed to the normalisation of domestic violence. Owing to rampant poverty, the women of Taekas have difficulty escaping the cycle of violence. This finding supports the argument that, as tend to strictly adhere to cultural and religious customs, domestic violence is most severe amongst lower-class families and that women in such families are more likely to be subjected to male dominance and control (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Meanwhile, the economic structure of Pondok Batu—rooted in agriculture, but flexible enough to accommodate alternative opportunities for earning an income—has given women more ways to earn an income. As a result, violence against women in Pondok Batu tends to be

psychological, including financial neglect and extramarital affairs. It may also be related to the dual burden of caring for the family while earning money outside the house.

Following Walby (1990), this article underscores that social values, religious norms, and economic conditions combine to shape the normative values and power structures that justify men's dominance of women and perpetuate the patriarchy. Following Dobash and Dobash (1979), this article holds that the patriarchal system is most evident in the practice of domestic violence.

This article discusses two factors that affect the practice of violence against women, as well as how these factors influence women's ability to escape the cycle of violence. These two factors are as follows: normative factors (social values and religious norms) and economic factors.

### ***Normative Factors: Social and Religious Norms***

Timorese social norms that enable men to dominate public spaces, in conjunction with the conservatism of the Catholic Church, have contributed significantly to the perpetuation of social norms that subordinate women in Taekas. Owing to the marginalization of women in social relations, as well as the sacralization of marriage, violence in Taekas has been predominantly physical. Nonetheless, it remains an invisible problem, as the women of Taekas remain shackled by cultural and religious values that preclude them from escaping or discussing their experiences with violence.

The women of Taekas remain trapped within culture traditions that

perpetuate the cycle of violence, including a dowry (*belis*) system that justifies men's dominance of women's bodies as well as a moral structure that sacralises the institution of marriage (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). As a result, women cannot easily escape men's dominance or social control. Within both customary culture and Church canon, women who attempt to escape their husbands' control are seen as immoral people who have failed to properly honour and obey their husbands (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Idioms such as "Once the dowry is paid, we surrender the rattan to the husband" perpetuate husbands' power over and 'ownership' of their wives, and are ultimately used to justify violence against women.

In Taekas, violence against women is often triggered by trivial everyday matters. For instance, a man may respond violently if his wife is late making and serving coffee, or if she has been too busy to prepare dinner for himself and the children. Such violence is supported by the Timorese cultural belief that 'service' and 'domestic duties' are part of ideal womanhood. Women's subordination within the family is also legitimized socially through such statements as "To become a true Timorese woman, one must serve wholeheartedly". As such, where women are unable to fulfil their domestic duties, men feel it is their right to punish/educate them with violence. Also contributing to conflict and violence in Taekas are: (1) economic difficulties, (2) knowledge gaps between husband and wife (male egotism), (3) jealousy, and (4) drunkenness.

These factors underscore that, in Timorese culture, men are viewed as the wielders of power and privilege. Because such patriarchal culture is strongly institutionalized, when women attempt to

escape it, they are perceived as challenging the structure of society and thus pressured—often through violence—to return to their 'place in the hierarchy' (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Previous studies have shown that domestic violence is influenced by a range of factors, and may even occur in response to them (Lockton, 1997). In Taekas, the stress of poverty has amplified the potential for spousal abuse. Furthermore, the practice of alcoholism—itsself driven in part by poverty—has further increased the prevalence of domestic violence (Lockton, 1997).

Similar phenomena are indicated in Pondok Batu, where the social construction of women and womanhood has subordinated women in the household. Nonetheless, as social values and religious norms are not as tangible in Pondok Batu as they are in Taekas, men and society control women using different means. Physical violence against women, thus, is not as prominent. Rather, women in Pondok Batu are more commonly subjected to psychological violence, including financial neglect and extramarital affairs.

This has been influenced by the social construction of ideal womanhood in Pondok Batu. For local residents, the perfect wife is one who nurtures her children and serves her husband. Women are expected to understand, serve, and obey their husbands, as well as to become good mothers for their children; indeed, in Pondok Batu, there is even a belief that childcare is exclusively women's work, and this construction of ideal womanhood often contributes to domestic violence. Furthermore, in Pondok Batu, both men and women see men doing domestic labour (cleaning, caring for children, etc.) as inappropriate and even taboo. Women's

subordination and disparate positioning is thus clearly evident.

Field research in both villages found that social norms, rooted in religious values, normalize the practice of violence against women. These norms legitimize husbands' use of physical, verbal, and economic violence against their wives. In Taekas, for instance, women understand physical violence as their husbands' means of educating them, and thus accept it to an extent. Similarly, in Pondok Batu, women's perceived shortcomings are often used to justify men's decision to neglect them or to conduct extramarital affairs. Ultimately, as a result of normative values that subordinate them and legitimize their husbands' dominance, women are unable to oppose male control or escape the cycle of violence.

### ***Economic factors***

Without economic capital, women lack bargaining power within the household and they are positioned as inferiors. Research shows that lower-class women, particularly those that live in poverty, are more vulnerable to domestic violence (Evans, 2005; Moe & Bell, 2004; WHO, 2002; Eastman, Williams & Carawan, 2007; Hughes et al., 2015). This also holds true for Taekas and Pondok Batu, where most incidents of domestic violence can be traced to household financial difficulties.

In both Taekas and Pondok Batu, women and children are financially dependent on their husbands. As such, when husbands fail to earn enough to support their everyday needs, this causes domestic problems and conflict. Usually, women must ask their husbands for the money necessary to meet their daily needs, as men do not set aside money for food,

education, etc. In Taekas Village, families must also allocate sufficient money for expensive social activities, including traditional rituals and church gatherings; failure to contribute to such activities would bring a family great shame. However, single-income families tend to have difficulty covering all of their expenses. Where every day needs are not met, friction and ultimately violence may occur.

In both Taekas and Pondok Batu, women contribute significantly to their families' finances. However, as they are the heads of their families and as they are not burdened with domestic duties, men have greater control (Munoz, 1998). Women, conversely, are constrained by their dual domestic and economic burdens. The economic disenfranchisement of women within their families, thus, leaves women and children more vulnerable to domestic violence.

In Taekas, husbands' limited income—coupled with the financial burden of family expenses and social rituals—leads to women entering the workforce. However, even with two incomes, families are sometimes incapable of ensuring their needs are met. Earning an income, it appears, does not guarantee that women can escape domestic violence.

Also contributing to domestic violence is the knowledge gap between husbands and wives. For generations education was only available to male children; the vast majority of female children were not sent to school. Only in recent decades have families educated their daughters, some to the university level. Many have shown themselves to be more dedicated and committed to their studies than their male classmates. Often, young women continue their studies in the cities of Kefamenanu or Kupang, then

return to Taekas to marry a local man. Knowledge gaps frequently result in friction within the household. Even when they dropped out of school, men feel themselves superior to their wives, and use violence to assert their dominance within the household.

Meanwhile, owing to rampant drug abuse and financial neglect, the women of Pondok Batu have no choice but to become financially independent. To cover their families' everyday expenses, such as food and education, women are forced to bear a dual burden. Many work as day laborers at palm oil plantations, while others seek employment in Medan and other major urban centres. However, women who travel in search of employment face significant stigma. One young woman, who sought employment outside Pondok Batu after being economically neglected by her husband, narrated that local gossips had branded her a cheap whore. She explained that such stigma was commonly attached to women who had experienced financial neglect.

Although residents of Pondok Batu have more opportunities to improve their economic welfare than residents of Taekas, this does not significantly affect their bargaining power within the household. Owing to local beliefs, the women of Pondok Batu are limited in their ability to act. Often, they have difficulty obtaining their husbands' permission to work/travel outside the village, even when travelling in a group and returning the next day. Women's inability to become 'perfect wives' often leads to them experiencing psychological violence.

## Conclusion

Through its study of two villages, this article has found that social values, religious norms, and economic difficulties are major drivers of the domestic violence they experience. For instance, in Taekas, patriarchal values are institutionalized within the everyday lives of the women through Timorese culture. This is exacerbated by poverty, which limits their ability fulfil their everyday needs and ultimately drives domestic violence. Patriarchal culture is similarly tangible in Pondok Batu, where men are perceived as the breadwinners and primary decision-makers. However, there are differences: poverty is omnipresent in Taekas, and women are thus required to seek additional income to support their families, while in Pondok Batu economic problems are driven by widespread drug abuse. Although families' average incomes in Pondok Batu are relatively higher than in Taekas, this money is often used to acquire narcotics; as a result, women are unable to ensure their families' everyday needs are met. In both cases, where families' needs are not met, women are more vulnerable to domestic violence.

This article has shown that domestic violence is experienced by women of various class, economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. However, poor rural women who live in a patriarchal society are most vulnerable. Consequently, programmes that seek to eradicate domestic violence must recognize and consider these factors.

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