

## **THE INFLUENCE OF MALAY CULTURE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ISSUES AMONG WOMEN IN PENANG**

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**Abstract:** *Malay women in Malaysia are all subject to domestic violence crisis. It is very important to look at how culture may lead to domestic violence. This study focuses on the influence of Malay culture that can lead to domestic violence among women. A total of 15 Malay women victims of domestic violence (informants) were involved in this exploratory qualitative study. Informants were involved in in-depth interviews and data gathered were analyzed using NVIVO 8. The study findings have indicated that domestic violence stem from the various elements of cultural influence in the local Malay community, which indirectly form a perspective of gender inequality between the husbands and wives. Several suggestions from the social work intervention perspectives have been discussed in greater depth in order to reduce the issue of domestic violence among women in the country.*

**Keywords:** *Domestic Violence, Malay Culture, Gender Inequality.*

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### **Introduction**

Domestic violence is one of the social problems which requires more research to address the issue (Bogeanu, 2012). Domestic violence is defined as the use of scary, manipulative or coercive behavior towards a partner with the intention to retain power and control over his intimate partner. This form of violence is imposed on victims through physical, psychological, social, sexual or financial abuse (WAO, 2017).

Report of physical and sexual violence among women by the World Health Organization (2013) have reported that South East Asia showed the highest percentage with 37.7%, followed by other regions. In this case, Malaysia also contributed to the percentage of domestic violence for

women in the South East Asia.

Research by Rashidah, Noraida, Siti Hawa, Intan, Sarimah, Siti Waringin, Puzziawati, Gaayathri, Nur Saffiah and Siti Shahrizatil Husna (2013) showed that 8% women in Malaysia were involved in domestic violence problems. Bahari, Usman and Ninggal (2008) explained that domestic violence crimes affect the victims. As Lee (2007) reported that there a significant relation between abusive behavior and alcohol use to the abusers, which led to physical and emotional abuse on women victims. Mardiyati (2015) also emphasized that domestic violence does gives impact to psychological trauma to the victims and their children, which oftenly lead to depression and violent behaviors to others when they become adults.

Statistic on incidents of domestic violence against women is being collated by various government and non-government agencies that are helping women in crisis (Noraida, 2011). According to the statistic reported by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (2016), a total of 590 victims of domestic violence had been reported in Malaysia between January to November 2015. The figure showed that the majority of 557 are women victims and 33 men victims. Analysis based on ethnicity showed that the Malays recorded the highest number of 327 victims compared to other races. This analysis once again reported that 309 are women victims and 18 men victims. This study is imperative as Penang recorded to be the third largest state which contributed 64 cases of domestic violence in Malaysia. Based on this total, 50 women were victims of domestic violence and the rest were men. This study aims to understand the dynamics of domestic violence among Malay women in Penang.

## **Literature Review**

Lucena, Deininger, Coelho, Monteiro, Vianna and Nascimento (2016) identified violence against women as one of the behavior based on gender abuse in term of male domination in a social relationship with women. It is included cultural legitimized which women be an object of aggression and will give impact to the biological, psychological and social. This violence form also clarified abuse as inequalities of gender in the heterosexual relationship between male and women.

In Malaysia, the government also has recognized domestic violence issues as one of a serious problem in this country. A few improvements to the existing of Malaysia's Domestic Violence Act 1994 are amended to ensure the relevance of this act in the current situation nowadays. For example, Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Community Development (April 26, 2017) at a thirteenth Parliamentary Assembly in the Dewan Negara stated that the ministry was taking seriously the issue of domestic violence against women in the country. As a result, the first amendment to domestic violence 1994 on 21 December 2012 was enforced on February 20, 2013. The definition of domestic violence not only focuses on physical forms, but also emphasizes the form of emotional, mental, psychological, substance abuse, and delusional effects on victims and children.

The culture in society can be adopted for the purpose of understanding abuse problem between the couples (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2011). This is because some cultures accept the behavior of domestic violence and support the form of violence at home and also adopted the domination men against women. Hence, this ideology also adopted by community groups, especially to women victim. The finding also shows the victim received more criticisms because the community only felt that women victim was only eligible to despicable without

gaining empathy in a relationship. At the same time, they are ignoring the form of mistakes that the abuser has done to the victim.

According to Sajaratulnisah Othman, Chris Goddard and Leon Piterman (2014), the patriarchal concept in the society also raises the various stigmas of the community towards victims in Malaysia, especially for single mothers who try to seeking divorce as a way to end the problem. As a result, some of the victims are willing to suffer rather than facing negative stigmas from the social environment. At the same time, the form of women's understanding of defending a family's dignity in religious contexts can reduce their capacity to seek outside resources. Consequently, most Muslim women victims find it difficult to take divorce action because they feel fearful to be disobedient if they leave their spouses.

Research elsewhere has detected that masculine ideology in the Malaysian society also showed the patriarchal concept in family institutions formed through the main control of men as the main deterrent to women in the context of domestic violence (Kelvin, Noraida, Intan Hashimah, Nor Hafizah & Azmawati, 2016).

Social-economic status can also contribute factor for the domestic violence problems. Report by WAO (2017) showed financial dependence on the perpetrator does often make women more vulnerable to this problem and less able to leave an abusive situation. Not only homemakers, working women also can be just as impacted by domestic violence. Based on this report, 38% or 73 from 192 domestic violence survivor in WAO sheltered in 2015 and 2016 were homemakers while 71% or 52 of that total forced by their husbands to stay at home. This result is exerting control by husbands over the woman victim can be a form of social and financial abuse. It is also affected to victims social-economic status which is woman be financially dependent to husband. So, this exerting control by husbands over the woman victim can be a form of social and financial abuse.

Also, Mariny (2014) described that the different power between men and women in the society in most of the Asian countries impacted the imbalance of respect including social and economic aspects of women. Traditionally, the social system in the Malaysian society, especially the Malays, adopts the role of men as a breadwinner in parallel with the masculine nature in order to dominate the traits of women who are more classified as passive, dependent and maternal. This form of thinking has created gender mainstreaming, which is more suitable for women at home and the responsibility in managing domestic matters.

Asar and Bouhedda (2016) mentioned some people believe that domestic violence related to certain ethnic, religious, education level, employment status and also including social-economic background. One of the literature reviews in this study found that Islam does not oblige a woman to be a breadwinner for herself nor her family because their main role are more focusing to home area such as be a good sub system in family. But, men such as father, brother or husband should take this responsibility to give obliged expenses to women. So, this aspect in directly will impact to dependency gender in social-economic aspect because women not allow to work outside.

Social-economic status also inter related with issue of women working outside home which is never ending especially in Muslim world (Asar & Bouhedda, 2016). This finding study has concluded that women is permissible to work outside home as long as they follow Islamic guidelines which suitable with environment and society environment of Islamic culture. The

researcher found that current patriarchal culture is one of the reasons on going argument. It is because the opinions more focusing on issue as the traditional Muslim scholars but do not concern much on discussing about detailed Islamic guidelines for women to work outside home. Some local people mentioned that women and men are different in term of nature and culture. For example, woman is weak in body structure compare to man. Otherwise, the participation of women in any types of work should be related with their personality as a wife and mother to children. It is mean that woman should make sure that their work is appropriate with their society's custom. So, all of this matter can impact to socioeconomic status of women because the society environment of Islamic impact the types of work which suitable with the nature of women.

In parallel with that, Yulianto (2016) has found that there is a confusion in the understanding of the community in terms of the respect of the male status as a husband in a marriage that it builds a public perception where men are entitled to control women. The culture also supports the idea that wife is inferior to the husband superior, especially in terms of economic aspect. This indirectly produced different gender roles which are practiced by each spouse in the society. Furthermore, this contributes to the husbands' violence towards the wives because the society adopts the ideology that husbands have power over to the couples and all other family members.

As noted by Sabina and Tindale (2008), getting the appropriate social support for the women victims is the best way to empower women victims to be out of the domestics abused cycle. For example, expressing support for the women's perspective and the sense of self-worth among the victims are the need of domestic violence victims. This empathy from the support system which is the family, neighbours and friends show moral support and encouragement for divorce.

A recent study by Noraida Endut and Intan Hashimah (2011) in the context of Malaysia also detected that existing social systems including family members, close friends and those who have similar problems are an important source of support for the victims. Such various systems can help domestic violence victims to be a survivor in the form of emotional, financial, practical and useful information.

## **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study aims to explore the phenomena of 15 Malay women in Penang State who have experienced domestic violence. Recruitment of the respondents were through snowballing technique in the Georgetown, Penang area. Purposive sampling was employed based on several criteria, involving married Malay women and survivors of domestic violence; 18 years and above; and victims have good sanity to ensure data accuracy. This study applies face-to-face interviews which based on the interview guidelines that were developed according to the study objectives. NVIVO 8 software has been utilized to analyze the collected data in the form of verbatim which then was transcribed carefully to ensure accuracy of the data.

## **Results**

The study findings have captured few important themes, including community perceptions of domestic violence victims; conflict and mismatch of roles according to community expectations in family household.

## **Community Perceptions towards Victims of Domestic Violence**

The first theme is community perceptions which can be analyzed from the stigma which become barriers for victim's action to get out from the problem.

### **Stigma on Victims**

A variety of negative stigmas against the victims came from the surrounding environment, including from members of the biological families, host families, neighbours and friends. The study findings found that seven respondents admitted that the existing social systems negatively affected them, although the family members were aware that the spouse or partners did various forms of physical, mental and sexual abuse to the victims. The family members would still blame the victims for the spouse's actions without really understanding what had actually happened. There are family members who told the victims to look into their lack of self-sufficiency which the family members see as the triggering factor to abusive behavior of the spouse. A few of the family members also blamed the victims for legal actions taken against their husbands. Not only that, victims were also accused of being pregnant by other men and it is proper to be abused. In addition, there are family members who see that the victims and their children were burdensome.

Study findings have also reported that eight respondents have faced various barriers from their social surroundings impact from the negative perceptions. There are family members advising the victims to find all sorts of alternative to improve their husbands' behaviours. Victims were asked to be always patient although they are being abused. There are also cases where the victim's mother does not approve any divorce in the family in order to avoid public's perception of having to rear children without a father. Hence, often family members or parents of the victims would want them to save the marriages.

The second theme is role conflicts which focus on two dimensions. The first dimension is role conflict between couples and the second one is inequality of roles according to community expectations.

### **Roles Conflicts Between Couples**

There are seven victims were in conflict of roles in the household management. Their work burden lead to stress because they had to take all the responsibilities in managing the household without any help from their husbands. Worst, a few of them were forced to work outside to get enough money. It was because they had to cover the cost of home expenses by themselves. The findings also found that husbands just gave a little helping in term of managing their household when the victims were unwell as abstinence.

### **Inequality of Couples Roles According to Community Expectations**

Under this theme, six respondents said that the community was dissatisfied with the way they and their spouses managed the household because they were not sharing the roles of responsibility as husband and wife. In these cases, the responsibility was only carried out by the victims themselves. In the meantime, the social system was obscure to the victim if she did not perform the tasks like tying the cloth even though the task was prohibited by her husband. The surrounding community also found the husbands did not play a good role as the head of a

family because their wives were tortured. In addition, the family which had a mother-in-law, for example, always blamed the victim by comparing the victim's behaviour with her son's former wife.

## **Discussions and Suggestions**

Based on the results above, the problems of domestic violence in this study are somewhat influenced by the Malay culture. This is obvious based on the perceptions of the family members, neighbors and friend who have negative stigmas on the victims of domestic violence. This is primarily due to the strong Malay culture based on customs and gender dominance, which somewhat has some impact the victims' action is seeking social justice. In addition, due to the cultural perceptions, it will also impede victim's self development including social, cognitive as well as emotional development.

This social system continues to impede victims' actions to come out of the abused cycle. This is clearly demonstrated by the existence of gender bias in the Malay culture that women should be focusing on children's wellbeing and hence separation should be the last resort. According to Sajaratulnisah Othman, Chris Goddard and Leon Piterman (2014), it is the patriarchal concept in the society that raises the various stigmas of the community towards women victims in Malaysia, especially single mothers who try to seeking divorce as a way to end the problem. Similarly, it is the patriarchal concept in family institutions that deter women victims from being out of the domestic violence cycle (Kelvin, Noraida, Intan Hashimah, Nor Hafizah & Azmawati, 2016). As a result, some of the victims are more than willing to suffer with their problems rather than experiencing negative stigmas from the society. At the same time, the role of women defending family's dignity in the religious contexts is also one of the primary factors that hinder women victims from getting divorce from their spouses.

As noted by Sabina and Tindale (2008), getting the appropriate social support for the women victims is the best way to empower women victims to be out of the domestics abused cycle. A study by Noraida Endut and Intan Hashimah (2011), in the context of Malaysia, existing social systems including family members, close friends and those who have similar problems are an important source of support for the victims. Such various systems can help domestic violence victims to be a survivor in the form of emotional, financial, practical and useful information.

Therefore, social work practice is pertinent in order to help and support victims of domestic violence to fulfill their needs. As noted by Johnson (1992), social worker competency is focusing on the need and social functioning of the target group. Mezzo and macro are important aspect in intervention to minimize the negative perception by social environment. In this case, social worker as educator should emphasize the concept of gender equality through awareness and education campaigns in the context of Malay culture and marriage. Hopefully, the negative adaptation of patriarchal concept between husband and wife in Malay culture can be reduced through the campaigns. A few government and non government agencies can participate in this intervention based on target group needs. Thus, social worker can provide individual and family interventions in order to reduce negative stigma from the social systems. A good social system can be a positive indicator to the domestic violence victims to improve their wellbeing and social functioning.

In addition, the influence of the Malay culture significantly related to the role conflict between husbands and wives. This is because of the Malay culture that still adopts gender ideology

where women have more responsibilities to do housekeeping than men. So, this problem gives a negative stigma and also burdens the wives with various household chores. This ideology is understood by each couple, especially the wives because the influence of the Malay culture in the society has embraced the form of understanding of the division of gender-specific tasks, especially in household matters. The imbalanced roles played by each partner has caused the wives burden which is shown indirectly in the forms of domestic violence problems. In fact, the wives believe that they are responsible for household matters without assistance from their husbands. This not only brings emotional stress but also causes fatigue in the body. For example, Mariny (2014) described that the different power between men and women in the society in most Asian countries impacted the imbalance of respect in economic, social and political aspects of women. Traditionally, the social system in the Malaysian society, especially the Malays, adopts the role of men as a breadwinner in parallel with the masculine nature in order to dominate the traits of women who are more classified as passive, dependent and maternal. This form of thinking has created gender mainstreaming, which is more suitable for women at home and the responsibility in managing domestic matters.

This role conflict is closely related to the expectation of the community around which is gender exploitation should be followed by the couple in the Malay culture. This is indirectly forming the mindset of the victims because they are seen to be obscured by the society if they do not play the right role in the household aspects, even though all of this impact their well-being holistically. This theme indirectly shows that the Malay community is still influenced by the gender bias ideology. In parallel with that, Yulianto (2016) has found that there is a confusion in the understanding of the community in terms of the respect of the male status as a husband in a marriage that it builds a public perception where men are entitled to control women. The culture also supports the idea that wife is inferior to the husband superior, especially in terms of economic aspect. This indirectly produced different gender roles which are practiced by each spouse in the society. Furthermore, this contributes to the husbands' violence towards the wives because the society adopts the ideology that husbands have power over to the couples and all other family members.

As a broker, social worker can connect local communities with relevant social service agencies including NGOs in order to increase awareness about domestic violence issues. For examples, social worker at Perbadanan Pembangunan Wanita Pulau Pinang (PWDC) can work with Jabatan Agama Islam for providing information about domestic violence issues. This exposure focusing on marital context and home management based on religion perspective in Malay society. Discussion of this issues is very important including role conflict and gender role aspect among couples to help the community to understand more about equality roles as husband and wife in a marital of Malay and Islamic contexts. As a result, adaptation of exploitation roles as a wife based on Malay culture perspective can be reduced. From that, this target group can also achieve social justice especially in marital aspect which is one of the social work goals.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of domestic violence has a significant relationship with the influence of Malay culture that has been adopted by the surrounding community including the mezzo systems in term of the families, neighbours and friends. Overall, there are still existing social systems which accept gender exploitation ideology towards this target group. As a result, various stigmas are detected and victims are also prevented from making decisions to leave their

spouses. The perceptions of the Malay community influence the role conflicts between couples. Accordingly, women have more burden especially in household matters. At the same time, the surrounding communities have a high expectation for each couple to carry out their responsibilities as husband and wife as commonly practiced in the Malay culture. As a result, the victim is seen to be in disarray because of the need to comply with the roles which the Malay culture emphasizes. This impact clearly shows the gender inequality against the victims. Consequently, social work professions can help to reduce this domestic violence issues. In this aspect, social workers are not only competent to handle interventions in the context of individuals and families, but social workers should also play a role as educators and brokers in order to provide their awareness of the Malay community regarding the concept of gender equality in household management. This indirectly reduces the influence of the Malay culture which is a contributor to the domestic violence problem among women, especially in the state of Penang.

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