

RESEARCH

Domestic Violence Against Wives in the context of “male marginality” in Aceh, Indonesia.

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Abstract

This article examines an often overlooked issue in studies of domestic violence against wives by exploring a phenomenon "Male Marginality" as a tool for interpreting domestic violence against wives in the social context of male marginality that has been changed and replaced with male privilege in the context of Islam changing women's power in Aceh. The study applied ethnographic research, by collecting information from the life experiences of women aged 26–60 years who were abused or experienced marital violence victims by their husbands. The fieldwork was conducted between 2014 and 2017 in Aceh, Indonesia. the findings revealed that the concept of “male marginality” has been turned into a male privilege by men in the name of the religion to justify violence against their wives or to create an opportunity to marry a wealthy woman in the hopes for depending on them economically. In the meantime, women are worried about male privilege realizing that they need to obey their husbands because of religion. Besides, the authority of husbands is backed by local culture, which is likely to result in women being abused by their husbands. Thus, the women describe male marginality as reducing the chance of being abused by their husbands and the possibility of polygamy.

Keywords: Male marginality, Male privilege, Violence, Gender, Aceh Wives.

Introduction

“When he was rich, he had secret affair with other women” And now he said “I do not have any money and that's why I don't leave you. If I had much money I would have left you and found another one.”

(Interview with Ranah¹, 12 March 2016)²

The violence against women in Aceh, particularly domestic violence against wives, has been clearly defined and recognized as a social problem and been stated in the family policies reforms since the Seventeenth Century by Queen Safiatuddin as the head of state. She created a policy that obligates Acehnese parents to provide their daughters a house or land at the time of their daughter's marriage and the owner of the house in the family is a wife who in Aceh language is called *po-rumoh*, and the husbands move to the households and villages of their wives. (Hasjmy., 1997:127), It is an idea that has deeply-rooted and embedded in marital relationships on the grounds that as a tribute to the women to negotiate male privilege in the family.

Traditional family policies empowering Aceh women through the ownership of the house results in women stability and balanced gender power relations within the marital relationship. (Hasjmy, 1997:126). While Islamic teachings emphasize the dominant role of the man as the head-of-household performing an important role as husband and father. Therefore, Aceh husbands being the head of households in the wife's house, according to Siegel and Siapno is traditional family policies, have contributed to men relegated to a very marginal role in households where husbands are powerless *“houseguests”* in their own home (Siegel, 1969:179–180; Siapno, 2002: 61),

The roles and positions of Acehnese men and women in the contemporary context have changed compared to the past. According to Amir, traditional family policies including dwelling system have changed in some instances in post-revolutionary Ulama-dominated Acehnese politics as well as the modern patriarchal Indonesian state which significantly influenced the changes in gender relationships. (Amir, 2002:80). At present, all Acehnese women that I interviewed did argue that the wife is still referred to as *po-rumoh* (owner of the house) but the only difference is that in the case of derivative acquisition ownership, forasmuch Acehnese parents have not to provide their daughter a house or land anymore. Being the owner of a woman's house is seen as a burden to women today.

¹ For ethical reason, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

² “Dulu waktu dia banyak uang. Perempuan lain dia ada. dan sekarang yang dia gomong. “Kalau abang udah ada uang kamu saya tinggal. Kata dia, Ini kerana tak ada uang maka nya kamu belum saya tinggal.”

Even though Acehnese women have been represented as powerful agents who enjoyed “*high status*” in family and society, (Siegel, 1969; Siapno, 2002; Afrianty, 2015) on the other hand, found that the contemporary discourse primarily portrays Acehnese women as victims, particularly the victims of domestic violence by husbands. According to Ranah's quotes at the beginning of this article, she reflected the authority of husbands over wives and male privilege through male marginality and poor status of her husband by her husband's claiming the polygamy marriages rights to negotiate male marginality in a marital relationship. Although she regarded the status of home ownership as one of the tools used to negotiate the power of her husband, she found the owner's status also burdens the women to build or rent a house on their own. Consequently, it reduces the responsibility of men to build or provide accommodation for their wives which is the main role of Muslim husbands.

Therefore, in this article, I want to argue how the social context of male marginality has been changed and replaced with male privilege in the context of Islam changing women's power that may affect domestic violence against wives.

Methods

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork collecting data from the life experiences of women aged 26–60 years old who were the victims of marital violence and abuse by their husbands. The fieldwork was conducted between 2014 and 2017 in Aceh, Indonesia. In-depth interviews were conducted with thirteen married women, three of whom are presented as case studies in this paper to show how abusive marital relationships to women in the context of male marginality were conceived and experienced in Aceh at the time. My key informants in this study came from several different backgrounds, including education and subsequently analyzing it based on their reasoning and analysis.

Defining male marginality

Male Marginalization is not a new phenomenon, according to James Siegel 's pioneering study of ‘male marginality’ in Acehnese society during the 19th century, which is a strongly Islamic and at the same time matrifocal society. Siegel's interpretation, Acehnese society is a matrifocal society with dominant roles of women, and Acehnese men referred to male marginalization to indicate that they felt inferior to women in the position of ‘guest’ in the home which is usually owned by the women, their self–feelings of “otherness” and men usually owned no resources when they were married (1967: 141; 1969:53)

According to Siapno, what Siegel described above is Aceh's matrifocal tradition, whereby women's places are at the center of the family, a culture that contradicts Islamic values that emphasize men's position as head of the household, performing the role of a father and husband.

This matrifocal tradition, according to Siapno, has been increasingly challenged, in particular by attempts to revive Islam and strengthen tradition based on Islamic teachings. (Siapno, 2002, 37; Afrianty, 2015:96). Although, this dwelling system has changed in some instances in post-revolutionary Ulama-dominated Acehese politics as well as the modern patriarchal Indonesian state significantly influence the changes in gender relationships. Indeed, Siegel himself acknowledged these things as a potential rival to a less patriarchal society in Aceh. (Amir, 2002: 80)

However, Siapno points out the subtle practices of *male marginalization* embedded in everyday life. In the tales about Pak Pande and his wife, it is the woman who takes on the role as head of the household, responsible not only for supporting her husband through her industrious work but also for educating and socializing him on how to be a good Muslim. (1997: 240)

In Aceh society, a boy becomes an adult man when he is able to leave the matrifocal woman's world and travel (in search of work or knowledge). In Islam, an adult man ought to be the head-of-household. According to Siapno, the story above is funny because it subverts this tradition and presents with a man who refuses to leave his boyhood and prefers to be indefinitely dependent on his wife for maternal nurturance as male marginality (Siapno, 1997: 241).

However, the context of what Siegel and Siapno's interpretation are reflected in the interviews I conducted, every woman I interviewed presented about "male marginality" as a social phenomenon that was alive and thriving in a patriarchal society like Aceh. It was used by men as a tool to violate their wives and turned into male privilege in the context of Islam to take control over and abuse their wives. This article is trying to elaborate on two groups of victims affected by male marginality that has been turned into male privilege in the case studies. The first group includes victims of violence in families affected by male marginality that has been used as male privilege. The other group is that of women who expect male marginality to be their strategy to protect themselves from being abused by their husbands in the three following cases.

Case 1: domestic violence as a coping mechanism for feeling rejected and inferior to women.

Ranah was the victim to severe marital physical violence by her husband for the sake of her life. She was threatened of physical violence so she bore the hard works to save her life, etc. In this case, her husband did not work but forced Ranah to earn money. The physical violence was often triggered by the financial issue when her husband asked her for money but she did not have money or refused to give him. To their neighbors, her husband reasoned his violence due to his jealousy of her while in fact, it was solely because of her refusal to provide what he wanted.

"He was kind if I gave him money, but if I didn't help he would kick me! I only said," if you didn't work how would you earn money?!" (Interview with Ranah³, 12 March 2016)⁴

Ranah, a 35-year-old cosmetic products promoter, earned about 3–4 million Indonesian Rupiah which is not enough to cover the expenses for the whole family. In the case of Ranah, she is an example of women whose husband forced her to work outside by threatening to violate her physically or to kill her if she appealed to the court for a divorce. This is the example of a woman who married a man who hopes to rely on the wife in the family economy. Ranah told us that the marriage was formed because of the promise that her husband gave that he would take care of her and protect her and that he fell in love with her. To add to her decision to marry him, at the time he asked for her hand, he was working as a contractor and earned quite a lot of money. So she felt that she could rely on him financially. However, after the first year of their marriage, her husband faced a crisis with his construction business and has gone bankrupt. Since then, he never wanted to work again by claiming that he has a mental health problem from being disappointed with his business and bankruptcy. That was the beginning of his threatening force to Ranah that she had to work to earn or get beaten.

Being in the relationship with emotional, financial and physical violence like slapping and punching until she got injured and had to go to the hospital, made Ranah try to appeal the court to file divorce her husband for 3 times. But every time she appealed, her husband would threaten to kill her. She did believe that her husband was ready to kill her for sure and it was not a mere threat because is the only means for his survival and comfort. Because she understood her husband's life condition so Ranah did not choose to risk being killed by her husband. Instead, she decided to live with him for 11 years until the present.

"He sharpened a knife, he checked every corner. I was quite because he knew I was afraid of him"

(Interview with Ranah⁵, 12 March 2016)⁶

This case is an example of a wife who is victimized by her marginalized husband who exploits his male privilege by claiming religious laws to justify abusing and forcing his wife to work and

³ For ethical reason, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

⁴ "Baik kali kalau saya kasi uang, tapi kalau dia perlu uang saya tak bantu, dia menyepak! Saya ada lawan dengan kata kata saja. Saya balas "tak bangkit tidur mana ada uang"

⁵ For ethical reason, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

⁶ "Dia ada Asah parang, dia selek tiap-tiap tempat, saya diam kerana saya takut, saya tahu dia tahu saya takut dengan dia"

provide him. Husbands who abuse their wives often justify their actions by claiming jealousy and authority over their wives as Muslims, although the genuine reason for violence against wife, in this case, is abused female privilege for economic superiority over their husbands.

Case 2: why I married a poor man.

“I am married a very poor man, My husband has no family leadership. I, therefore, filed for divorce.”

(Interview with Nila⁷, 19 September 2016)⁸

One of my key informants named Nila told me why she decided to appeal to the court to divorce her husband, with divorce proceedings reasons, *“my husband doesn't provide for me”* but even that reality, she was the primary breadwinner in the family. Nila, a 36-year-old government school teacher, presented herself as a victim of domestic violence in a financially abusive relationship where her husband was unemployed and did not fulfill his duties as a husband. Her husband used to be a street *fruit seller*, he didn't look after and treat her and their son the way a husband and father is supposed to.

She claimed, initially, she gave him a chance in marriage although he was poor, by giving him money to invest in a business. The intention being once the man began to earn a good living, he would be able to look after his family properly. It was at the age of 32 Nila decided, she needed to settle down and start a family, she wasn't fond of the idea of marrying a rich man as she thought she would worry seeing him have other women around as well as her. She was content to marry a poor man but still expected her husband to be head of the family who will support them financially and domestically. Unfortunately, her husband didn't use the money given to invest in the business but spent it all instead and later consistently demanded more money from her. Four years passed and Nila was patient, but eventually, it was too much for her and she finally sued for a divorce.

One year later Nila's second marriage came culturally to support a disabled man by being able to look after him within her religion's principles, for example, being able to wash him. Her sacrifice to look after her new husband was supported by her husband's family, in which she would also receive a share of his inheritance. With this position, it gave Nila' the power of the head of the family and no longer needed to worry about domestic violence.

⁷ For ethical reason, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

⁸ “Saya kawin dengan suami yang miskin, Dia gak mau tanggung jawab keluarga, begitu Saya mintak pasak dia saja”

Nila's case is an example of financially abused women by husband, it was realized and worried about the abusive marital relationship and marital's status in the family, For Nila, the ownership of the house is not enough to provide women stability and balanced gender power relations within the marital relationship. It is important for women to negotiate their gender power relations or marriage and to better themselves with education, career, economic or seek men who are the inferior status for marriage, etc.

Case 3: Marrying a poor husband to minimize the chance of polygamy

Rahmi, a 38-year-old social worker. Her first marriage was with a local politician who had a decent social and economic status. She divorced her first husband because he had several secret wives. She believed that women were willing to wed a married man because of his social and financial conditions. Thus, Rahmi decided to remarry an ordinary man regardless of his social or economic background and chose to rely on the mutual dependency between her and her new husband.

Rahmi's second marriage took place about a year after the divorce with her first husband. The second husband proposed to Rahmi, which made her happy because it was delightful news for the widow with a child to be proposed. This made her feel worthy. Upon deciding to get married for a second time, Rahmi expected that she would have more security and leverage within the family because of her higher social and economic status. Although her new man was not financially reliable, Rahmi only hoped she could morally depend on him and that he would work hard to help build the family together.

Five months after the wedding, Rahmi found out her husband had stolen her property and left her while she was three months pregnant. In contrast to her expectations, the 38-year-old found herself being used by a man who exploited his marginality and helpless appearances to convince her to marry him, find a free accommodation, clear himself from the obligation to provide the wife with living allowance, and to have a child with her in order to convince her that it would be a long-lasting relationship. Realizing that she was deceived to get married for a second time, Rahmi ended the relationship with her husband gone without a trace.

"Men nowadays take advantage from their marriage, like to get free accommodation, like my second husband, when I was 3 month pregnant, he stole my gold and left me"

(Interview with Rahmi⁹, 5 September 2016)¹⁰

⁹ For ethical reason, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

Being tricked into marrying someone was nothing new to Rahmi because she is a social worker who has heard a lot about the issue from countless victims who filed complaints about the same problem. She believed that the marriage scam was a result of the fact that men had to deal with situations in which women were socially and financially superior to them while they were expected to be the ones who provided their women with living allowance and at the same time, women were not willing to marry a man who was going to financially depend on them. In fact, widows were not the only targets of this scam. Women of all status in Aceh with exposed weaknesses can fall victims to men's deception. Ranah's case, for instance, will be mentioned afterward. This particular case of Rahmi revealed a hidden agenda of the men who proposed women who were financially superior to them by offering to live as marginalized husbands willing to do housework and babysit, which were not the main values of men as family leaders. Although women perceived such an offer as equality in the relationship between a husband and wife, it did not represent women's desire for superiority over their husbands as claimed by Rahmi.

According to the aforementioned three cases, male marginality has been turned into a male privilege by men in the name of the religion to justify violence against their wives or to create an opportunity to marry a wealthy woman in hopes for depending on them economically. For instance, some men claimed to beat their wives out of jealousy in spite of the fact that they only did it in order to take advantage of their wives economically. In the meantime, women were worried about male privilege realizing that they needed to obey their husbands because of religion.

Discussion: From “male marginality” to “male privilege”

Siegel (1969) describes male marginality as incidentalized based on the understanding of the practical lack of relationship and bond between a husband and wife because the man needs to work in a different area (merantau). Also, a man who gets married and lives with his wife's family feels practically inferior. Such practical powerlessness is Siapno's definition of male marginality according to her studies.

The information collected from the three informants pointed out women's contribution to male marginality through the power and agency they access. In Ranah's case, she decided to marry a man with good social and economic status but male marginality of her husbands was incidentalized later in their marriage life. In this case, Ranah saw herself as a victim of domestic economic violence after she was forced to work and abused physically by her husband. Nevertheless, marginalized man can easily

¹⁰ “lelaki sekarang banyak yang mau menumpang hidup, kawin nya sebab mau menumpang hidup istri, suami yang ke dua saya, Ketika saya hamil dah tiga bulan, dia curi mas saya, sampai sekarang gak tau dia kemana”

use violence to their wives in order to control them. These men perceive power as a tool to overcome the feeling of being rejected, being far beneath women, and for the sake of their own benefits in different forms. As a new male privilege. Even though such actions are not consistent with religious conditions of male privilege.

Nila's case showed that the woman had decent social and economic status but chose to marry a poor man with lower status and ended up filing a divorcing because her husbands could not afford to provide for the family. This exposed the controversy and vagueness between the role of the abuser and victimizer even though she described herself as a victim of violence in the family. This case was similar to Rahmi's in regard to the expectation of male marginality as an opportunity to counterbalance the power in marital relationship between husband and wife without violence. In the meantime, men saw women with good economic status as an opportunity to make a profit. In other words, men exploited their marginality and helpless appearances to convince women to marry them, find free accommodation, clear themselves from the obligation to provide their wives with a living allowance. This pointed out clearly that women had to deal with men's agency as much as men had to deal with women's agency. In particular, both Rahmi's and Nila's cases reflected problems caused by women's choice to marry men by exploiting their male marginality to gain stability and balanced gender power relations within the marital relationship.

However, according to informants, women in Aceh chose to marry marginalized men in order to gain bargaining power over male privilege which they were aware of and perceived through education, personal experience, and culture in which male privilege brought difficulties in their family lives. Besides, men who had good economic status were more likely to have polygamy marriage in accordance with their economic conditions. Rahmi's and Nila's choices to marry marginalized men pointed out that they wanted to bargain with male privilege, not to gain superiority over them. Also, the fact that Rahmi divorced her first husband exposed her definition of and how she dealt with female privilege because alimony was described as a female privilege for Muslim wives.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued how the social context of male marginality has been changed and replaced with male privilege in the context of Islam changing women's power. Showing how male marginality has been turned into a male privilege by men in the name of the religion to justify violence against their wives or to create an opportunity to marry a wealthy woman in hopes for depending on them economically. For instance, some men claimed to beat their wives out of jealousy in spite of the fact that the intention was to take advantage of their wives economically. In the meantime, women were worried about male privilege realizing that they need to obey their husbands because of religion. Besides, the authority of husbands was backed by local culture, which is likely to result in women being abused by their husbands. Thus, the women described male

marginality as reducing the chance of being abused by their husbands and the possibility of polygamy. However, based on the three cases, what happens in real life did not go as women expected and therefore, they needed to come up with different solutions such as remarrying time and time again until they found a non-violent husband who could also lead the family.

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