

Indonesian Men's Perceptions of Violence Against Women

Violence Against Women

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Abstract

This article explores male perceptions and attitudes toward violence against women in Indonesia. It analyzes interview data from Indonesian men collected as part of a large multimethod Australian government–funded project on masculinities and violence in two Asian countries. Reluctance to talk about violence against women was evident, and the accounts of those men who did respond referred to three justificatory discourses: denial, blaming the victim, and exonerating the male perpetrator. The findings support continuation of government and nongovernmental organization (NGO) projects aimed at both empowering women and reeducating men.

Keywords

Indonesia, violence, women

Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, and cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth, and geography. A 2006 World Health Organization (WHO) study of domestic violence worldwide found “empirically, across a wide range of settings, that women are more at risk of violence from an intimate partner than from any other type of perpetrator” (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006, p. 1268).

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In 1984, Indonesia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which requires countries to take all appropriate steps to end violence against women (Nilan & Utari, 2008). Responsibility for implementation of this convention rests with Indonesia's Ministry for Women's Empowerment. Many well-intended government regulations and measures have since been implemented. These include the 1999 Zero Tolerance Policy and the 2000 National Plan of Action for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. In 2002, ministries for Women's Affairs, Health, and Social Affairs signed a joint agreement with the national police force to establish multisectoral and integrated services to victims of gender-based violence. In 2004, Law No. 23 on the Elimination of Domestic Violence set out procedures to protect victims of domestic violence and punish perpetrators. Government-funded organizations such as *Komnas Perempuan* (National Commission for Women) directly address violence against women and aim to reeducate the population on women's human rights (Krisnawaty, Wahid, Hasani, & Madaniah, 2009). At the grassroots level, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are active in developed urban areas. For example, the NGO *Rifka Annisa* in Yogyakarta works both with women as victims of domestic violence (see Hakimi, Hayati, Marlinawati, Winkvist, & Ellsberg, 2001) and with men as perpetrators of domestic violence (see Hasyim, Kurniawan, & Hayati, 2011). Both programs acknowledge how patriarchal traditions, both cultural and religious, enshrine the discourse of women as weak and inferior to men (Hasyim, Kurniawan, & Hayati, 2011; see also Ilyas, Ariyani, & Hidayat, 2005). For the program that works directly with men, targeted interventions challenge the assumption that men have the right to lead and discipline women. However, this is a deep cultural assumption and, given the prevailing discourses of masculinity in Indonesia, it will not be easily transformed.

Indonesian data on violence against women tend to be scarce and unreliable, yet "some evidence suggests that violence against women and sexual harassment are common" (van Klaveren, Tijdens, Hughie-Williams, & Martin, 2010, p. 16; see also Hakimi et al., 2001; Krisnawaty et al., 2009). For example, a recent study of violence in the family home in eastern Indonesia concluded that "it is violence in the private realm, and not the public sphere, that is the most pervasive form of gender-based violence in Indonesia" (Bennett, Andajani-Sutjahjo, & Idrus, 2011, p. 160). Whereas that study focused exclusively on women's accounts, in the current study we analyze men's viewpoints on domestic violence, which to date have not received due attention (Peralta, Tuttle, & Steele, 2010). By focusing on what Indonesian men think about violence against women, the findings of this study reveal widely held discourses that challenge efforts to bring about change.

Method

Research Setting

Like many rapidly industrializing nations in the world, unequal gender relations in Indonesia are changing only very slowly (Nilan & Utari, 2008). A democratic, lower

middle-income country with the 4th largest population in the world, more than 85% Muslim, Indonesia is currently ranked 87 of 134 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index. On the same index, of 18 countries in Asia, Indonesia is ranked 9th (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010). However, on the 2008 Gender Inequality Index, Indonesia was ranked 100 out of 138 countries and 14th in the group of 18 aforementioned Asian countries (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2010). Such measures illustrate in simple terms that there are still major gender inequalities and injustices to be addressed, including substantial and persistent violence against women.

Despite government and nongovernment organization initiatives to reduce violence against women in Indonesia, the actual reporting of domestic violence remains infrequent, and prosecution of such crimes remains low. Furthermore, safe houses and counseling centers for Indonesian women are few in number (Bennett et al., 2011). In many parts of Indonesia, traditional values and religious beliefs implicitly or even explicitly condone violence against women, particularly domestic violence, which typically is not seen as a crime or even an unusual event (Bennett et al., 2011). Consequently, neighbors, community leaders, and even local police and government agencies are reluctant to get involved or charge men with a criminal offense. In 2009, *Komnas Perempuan* reported 143,586 cases of physical violence against women, admitting that the figure only represented a small proportion of the actual cases occurring within the community (“Violence Against Women Highest in City,” 2010).

The 1974 Indonesian Marriage Law, still in place today, states that the husband is head of the family and protects his wife, who is defined in terms of her domestic role. Polygamy is allowed and wives must obtain their husband’s consent to get a passport or to take up night employment. In official New Order discourse, the role of a woman—*kodrat wanita*—was to be a wife and mother; that is, modest, docile, and focused on home and hearth (Robinson, 2001; Utomo, 2005). The role of a man—*kodrat pria*—was to be a husband and father, giving firm paternal guidance (Nilan, Donaldson, & Howson, 2009). Clark (2010) maintains that “the authoritative, masculinist and monolithic discourse of the Suharto era was intolerant of any perceived threats to the heteronormative social order,” including, it would seem, any questioning of the role of men or of violence within the family (p. 15). During the 30 years of the New Order regime in Indonesia, state violence was normalized (Hüsken & de Jonge, 2002), while non-state forms of conflict, including domestic and family violence, were officially banished altogether from public discourse (Sciortino & Smyth, 2002). In other words, until 1998 there was relative silence on the topic of violence against women.

Most men interviewed in this study would not even talk about violence against women. Such reluctance seems to be common worldwide. For example, writing in the United States, Neighbors and colleagues (2010) note that intimate partner violence “is often a taboo topic” (p. 379) and that men who were prepared to talk about it in interviews would usually deny it occurred in their communities, dismissing it as a private matter, such as a logical outcome of financial stress, or imply it was due to some weakness or fault on the part of the wife or girlfriend. Very few showed awareness that violence against women is wrong or illegal. Neighbors et al. (2010) confirm a strong relationship between perpetration of violence and acceptance or justification of

violence or hostility toward women. In the typical Indonesian home, the man is head of the household (Oetomo, 2000) and family members tolerate his authoritarian behavior, even when it involves physical violence.

Research Background

Although masculinity has not been a central focus in research on gender in Indonesia (Peletz, 2009), since the end of the New Order some valuable work on masculinities has been produced (see Clark, 2010; Jerome, 2008; Kurnia, 2004; Nilan, 2009; Nilan et al., 2009; Noszlopy, 2005; Oetomo, 2000; Spiller, 2010; van Wichelen, 2009; Wulan, 2009). A few studies have considered the link between masculinity and violence (e.g., Boellstorff, 2004; Clark, 2004; Elmhirst, 2007; Harjito, 2002; Nilan, Demartoto, & Wibowo, 2011; Wilson, 2012). What emerges from relevant studies in many different locations across the archipelago is a continuum of violent masculine practice organized around cultural discourses of honor, respect, and hierarchy (Nilan et al., 2011). Although these discourses are highly pertinent to violent clashes between men in the public sphere, they are just as important in the private sphere of relations with women.

An extensive 2010 study of Javanese men's attitudes to domestic violence demonstrates the deeply held conviction of men that men are born the superior sex. For example, one male interviewee stated simply,

That's just the reality, what else can we do, we are born as men and we automatically are proud of ourselves. When we were born as men, both religion and the government confirm that we automatically become leaders in the family. (Hasyim et al., 2011, p. 41)

The report concluded that "violence against women is a complex phenomenon and strongly rooted within unequal gender relations, sexuality, self-esteem and social institutions in the society" (Hasyim et al., 2011, p. 157). Moreover, domestic violence is rarely reported by the women who suffer it because "family problems are sensitive problems and taboo to be talked about and intervened, let alone by parties that are not known" (Hasyim et al., 2011, p. 168).

Another recent study of domestic violence by Bennett et al. (2011) was conducted with 504 married women from low-income families in the eastern islands of Lombok and Sumbawa. Of those surveyed, 43.1% reported emotional or physical abuse by their husband, and 16% stated they were afraid of him. None of the women had ever reported the abuse to authorities and most felt their experiences were just a "normal" part of married life. The authors of the study recommend that "research into Indonesian men's roles in and experiences of violence in the family is also needed to understand and address the problem of domestic violence in Indonesia in its full complexity" (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 158). The current study attempts in part to fill that identified gap in our understanding of the unequal power relations between Indonesian men and women that normalize violence against women.

Research Design

The interview data considered below were collected as part of a 2.5-year, Australian government-funded comparative project on masculinity and violence in Indonesia and India.¹ The following definition of violence informed the project:

Any act—physical, verbal or emotional—that is intended to, or results in, harm to another person or group. For example, verbal abuse, harassment, bullying, intimidation, extortion, fighting, rioting, assault, rape, torture, manslaughter, murder.

The project was approved to employ a mixed methods approach: first, a survey in both countries to get a broad sense of men's engagement with different forms of violence; and second, interviews with individual men and relevant NGO workers to obtain a deeper understanding of this engagement. Inevitably, it is difficult to reduce the findings of a broad-based, mixed methods, comparative study of that magnitude to a single set of outcomes. The research team made a decision to report on men's engagement with specific forms of violence by country (see, for example, Broom, Sibbritt, Nayar, Doron, & Nilan, 2012, on findings for India).

Accordingly, this article does not report on the full project, nor on India, nor on the full range of men's engagement with domestic violence, nor on accounts from NGO workers. Rather, it focuses on Indonesian men's perceptions of violence toward women to give readers of this journal a sense of the way Indonesian men of varied ages, from different walks of life, seem to think about violence against women. While there were questions asked about violence toward women in both the survey and the interviews, the data below come only from the semistructured interviews.

The value of the semistructured interview lies in the combination of structure and flexibility. It is a powerful research tool that yields great depth of information and understanding (Babbie, 2004). According to Silverman (2006), while project aims direct the questions asked in semistructured interviews, the technique also allows "some probing" into deeper meanings due to an informal interviewing style and variable interview time (p. 110). For this project, interview questions were fixed to the extent that they elicited accounts directly addressing project aims. Yet, at the same time, the questions were open enough to offer the men freedom for reflection and elaboration of responses. The relevant question in the second half of the interview schedule was

Apakah sering terjadi kekerasan oleh pria terhadap wanita dan anak-anak dilingkungan sekitar bapak?

Translation: Are men sometimes violent towards women and children around where you live, sir?

The polite question in Indonesian allowed men to talk about general trends, opinions, and events they observed, rather than probing them personally. The men who did answer the question at any length primarily spoke about violence against women and did not

mention children. As indicated above, many men were unwilling to say much on the topic, so if we had asked a personal question even fewer would probably have responded. Although it was not specified, most answered by talking about physical violence.

Data Collection

The data come from interviews with 86 Indonesian men aged 17 to 67 years in the five cities of Jakarta, Pekanbaru, Solo, Makassar, and Mataram. The interviewee code comprises letters to designate the city (J = Jakarta, P = Pekanbaru, S = Solo, MK = Makassar, MT = Mataram), and a number to designate sequence of the interview. For example, S5 means the interviewee was the fifth person interviewed in Solo.

The 86 interviewees came from among those survey respondents who indicated on the form an interest in being interviewed. They were selected to approximate a range of ages and backgrounds. Survey respondents had been recruited earlier using a “snowballing” technique similar to that employed by Singleton (2008) for a men’s health study (see also Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Berg, 2006). The advantage of the snowballing approach for qualitative research lies in accessing possible interviewees through social links to obtain useful complementary accounts. Interviews of between 30 and 45 min were conducted by male postgraduate social science research assistants who were native speakers. They also transcribed the interviews, which were later coded and then translated by two of the authors from Indonesian² into English. Anonymity of interviewees was preserved. Of the 86 interviews, only 25 contained solid answers to the question on violence against women. It is from these interviews that we quote below.

Data Analysis

When it came to analyzing the interviews, we followed the qualitative data analysis approach offered by Ryan and Bernard (2000) of deriving themes through coding, checking, and cross-checking transcripts. First, the transcripts were independently read by the researchers to derive potential themes from accounts and comments. Second, the researchers discussed the themes until consensus was reached. Final categories for coding were determined by the same method of independent categorization and subsequent discussion until agreement was achieved. Then each category was given a unique code. The codes were independently applied to fresh, unmarked transcripts and discussed again. The thematic headings in this article represent the outcome of the final stage of analysis, when themes were grouped under interpretive headings that pertain to discourses of justification and explanation.

Interview Data: Men’s Perceptions of Violence Against Women

It Doesn’t Happen—Or Only Rarely

In the interviews, men were asked about violence against women and children in their communities. Many were reluctant to answer the question, while others denied any

occurrence in their communities. More than a quarter of the sample of 86 said it did not happen; for example,

There is no violence towards women and children around where I live. (J10, 67, motorbike transport driver, married, Muslim, Jakarta, August 7, 2010)

I have never seen or heard anything about violence towards women and children here. (P17, 31, teacher, married, Muslim, Pekanbaru, August 10, 2010)

Violence against women and children? Never around here. Never. I've never seen it. (MT14, 34, security guard and gang member, Hindu, married, Mataram, June 17, 2010)

A soldier from Makassar said it happened elsewhere:

Violence against women and children very rarely happens around here. But it often happens in the neighborhood where one of my friends lives. (MK8, 31, military, married, Muslim, Makassar, June 22, 2010)

Similarly, it was implied that domestic and family violence only happened in poorer areas; for example,

Most of the people who live near me are tertiary educated and hold government positions. That kind of violence doesn't usually happen when people are from a higher education background. It doesn't happen towards women. (P1, 40, private sector clerk, Muslim, married, Pekanbaru, August 3, 2010)

In defense of their denial, some men reminded the interviewer that family and domestic violence were private matters that happened inside the home:

Violence against women and children very rarely happens around where I live. It really has to do with each private household anyway. (J13, 32, soldier, married, Muslim, Jakarta, August 10, 2010)

Some men denied physical violence but admitted that other forms of violence toward women took place:

There is very little physical violence against women here. The most usual form of violence is snapping at her and reprimanding her. That form of violence is definitely the most common to be conducted against women whether inside or outside the family. (MK11, 40, university lecturer, married, Muslim, Makassar, June 19, 2010)

This comment implies that verbal disciplining and abuse of women is a normal part of life, even in an educated, middle-class community.

It's Only Natural—"She Deserves It"

Perhaps because the interviews were conducted by men from the same city, some interviewees were quite candid about their views on violence against women. The most extreme statement was, "If I were to beat my wife, I would have the right because I was teaching her how to behave properly" (P4, 31, military, Muslim, married, Pekanbaru, August 4, 2010). In terms of normative gender relations, the man makes the rules in the home. The soldier above added, "the husband is supposed to be like the *Imam* [Muslim preacher] in the family." If a wife breaks the rules, there can be violent consequences. This was articulated by the following participant as well as some others who were interviewed:

Domestic violence happens inside the family. It's only natural. It happens from time to time in a family when there is a misunderstanding between husband and wife. Sometimes it happens if a wife breaks the rules, like coming home late at night is not proper behavior in a man's eyes. (P3, 25, trader and motorbike racer, Muslim, single, Pekanbaru, August 8, 2010)

Some religious discourses in Indonesia support the idea of gender equality, whereas others reinforce the idea that the husband must rule his wife because she is inferior; for example,

In Islam the ruling says that in the family women are supposed to be protected. However, the wife is weak and accepts information without filtering it. She also dismisses information in the same way, without filtering it. But if the woman has the proper understanding of what a wife should be, God willing, this will lead to clear communication and not mutual cursing at each other. I mean that's why it happens. (MT3, 28, political party activist, Muslim, unmarried, Mataram, June 20, 2010)

Economic Stress Causes Domestic Violence

There was a very strong discourse that financial difficulties in the household cause domestic violence. If the man cannot fulfill his role as provider, the woman complains. J9 explained, "The husband brings home his pay from work, but it is only a little, and his wife wants more than that" (J9, 48, bus driver and ex-prisoner, married, Muslim, Jakarta, August 9, 2010). Pressures on the man lead to violent outbursts: "Violence is especially likely for those men who are unemployed and are weighed down by the demands of the wife" (P14, 25, NGO employee, Muslim, unmarried, Pekanbaru, July 16, 2010). Many explanations focused on how the economic system puts a man under pressure and causes him to vent his anger at his wife; for example,

I think the main factor causing violence in the household is economic. Like now rice is expensive, cigarettes are expensive. Work is difficult. It is the case that the man gets angry . . . if he is unemployed then violence could happen in the end. Domestic violence happens because of financial difficulties. (J9, 48, bus driver and ex-prisoner, married, Muslim, Jakarta, August 9, 2010)

One interviewee gave the example of a man murdering his wife. He did not earn enough income, so she would not provide marital “services” any more:

The violence can get as bad as murder. Take the example of the husband who murdered his wife . . . the economic situation of the husband and the wife caused the problem between them. I suggest that the problem is that the husband did not improve his situation but stayed at the same low economic level, so the wife was not willing any more to serve her husband. (MT9, 50, regional government member, Mataram, July 5, 2010)

Some other accounts also emphasized the domestic conflict that can occur when a wife earns more than her husband:

You have domestic violence in a household. The man says, “My wife leaves early forgetting to care for the children, she doesn’t cook, clean and so on. When she comes home I am angry because her wages are higher than mine.” That’s a trigger for divorce. That couple will certainly get divorced because if a man economically supports his wife they never get divorced. But not in this case . . . because that kind of woman has a big ego, especially if her earnings are high. (P12, 35, NGO worker, Muslim, married, Pekanbaru, August 2, 2010)

Extramarital Affairs

Extramarital affairs were sometimes nominated as reasons that domestic violence took place: “It happens either because the husband is cheating on his wife or the wife is cheating on her husband” (J15, 45, security police, married, Muslim, Jakarta, August 2, 2010). In a frequent scenario, male infidelity creates conflict between the couple: “The husband has been unfaithful, so she gives him hell” (MK2, 38, security police, married, Muslim, Makassar, June 25, 2010).

Although it seems to be primarily husbands in Indonesia who have extramarital affairs rather than wives, women are frequently suspected of infidelity. Speaking once again of the man who murdered his wife, it was surmised by MT9 that

She might have been having an affair and that made him violent when he heard about it. This could not be clarified as true or not. In Islam, we might say that nothing was confirmed by his testimony [*tabayyun*], so the truth is still sought about that woman. (MT9, 50, regional government member, Mataram, July 5, 2010)

Violence Against Women Outside Marriage

So far, the discussion has focused on violence against women in the home. There were also comments about violence against women in the public sphere. Several interviewees inferred that social mixing between unrelated young men and women leads to violence: “Young men and women gathering together and talking and then that later leads to violence” (P19, 41, market trader, married, Muslim, Pekanbaru, August 9, 2010). The implication is that when young men and women mix, men are unable to control their violent sexual urges:

The biggest cause of violent incidents here at the mall, well actually it happened only yesterday, is male–female relationships. There was a problem here yesterday with a girl and a guy. The guy did something violent to her, he sexually assaulted the girl. (P20, 34, mall security guard, married, Christian, Pekanbaru, August 9, 2010)

Other examples in a similar vein were also given, such as, “one of my friends forced his ex-girlfriend to kiss him” and “sex workers experience a lot of violence” (MT11, 32, director of NGO, Mataram, June 20, 2010). Quarrels between romantic and courting couples were also reported; for example,

A young man and a young woman who belonged to a local youth organization were involved in a romantic relationship that ended up with a broken heart and the man was rather rough with the woman. (J16, 27, assistant lecturer, unmarried, Muslim, Jakarta, August 3, 2010)

In many accounts, the interviewees mentioned that verbal violence against women is a private and personal matter, so it was not appropriate to interfere:

It is most often verbal, like a man speaking to his girlfriend in an abusive manner until the woman starts crying and that winds him up even more. No one wants to get involved even though this verbal violence is taking place in the public street. It’s just a difference of opinion, finally it turns into a quarrel. The man flies into a rage and starts verbally abusing and swearing at the woman. When someone quarrels and gets very emotionally worked up like that I can understand how he uses very bad words and insults the woman. (MK9, 32, political party activist, married, Muslim, Makassar, June 23, 2010)

Violence against women was also indicated on university campuses; for example, “there is some violence towards women on campus that I know about” (MK3, 25, university student, unmarried, Muslim, Makassar, June 16, 2010). Furthermore, it seems the world of business is also a site for violence against women, given that male bosses may well regard their female employees rather like their wives:

Violence happens in the private world of business. Say we have a company director . . . if a woman tempts him, later he hits out at his secretary, if she is slow-moving and brings a dirty plate, or fails to offer him a cigarette. (P12, 35, NGO worker, Muslim, married, Pekanbaru, August 2, 2010)

Awareness

Despite the weight of negative evidence in the interview data assembled above, some of the interviewees did demonstrate awareness that violence against women was widespread and either unfair or illegal; for example,

The predominant form of violence takes place in the home. Violence in the home can be dealt with under Law Number 23 (2002) for the Protection of Children. Then there is Law

Number 23 (2004) that includes domestic violence against women, and Presidential Decree Number 65 (2005) that set up a national commission on violence. (P12, 35, community worker, Muslim, married, Pekanbaru, August 2, 2010)

It is probable that men who work in certain kinds of institutions or occupations do have more awareness of laws that prohibit violence against women:

Domestic violence? That would not be carried out by any man who knew about the regulations against it. It is possible such a man who would conduct violence on members of his family might not be aware of the rules and regulations. It sometimes happens like that. (MK2, 38, security police, married, Muslim, Makassar, June 25, 2010)

Some men were hopeful that the laws would reduce physical violence against women: “There are certainly beatings. . . . Now we have laws against violence, so I hope and pray that that will make people more readily condemn violence” (S7, 50, political party secretary, married, Muslim, Solo, July 28, 2009). Some admitted that Indonesian cultures traditionally favor men over women:

Our culture has always been patriarchal, so that the man holds the authority. Men have a higher social status compared to women. Patriarchal culture greatly influences all aspects of life in the home. (MK11, 40, university lecturer, married, Muslim, Makassar, June 19, 2010)

Other men acknowledged the cultural prohibition of men using physical violence against women and girls: “It is really taboo to strike women and female children” (P1, 40, private sector clerk, Muslim, married, Pekanbaru, August 3, 2010). Even one local gang member, fond of fighting with other men, was able to identify verbal abuse of a woman as violence:

It is violence if a guy yells at his girlfriend that she is a whore, a prostitute. That often happens to women. (MK1, 28, gang member, unmarried, Muslim, Makassar, June 20, 2010)

Discussion

The overview of interview themes above has painted a rather dark picture of Indonesian men’s normalized attitudes toward violence against women. Yet, there was some evidence in the interviews that awareness is starting to develop among men that violence against women is morally wrong, and in fact is a criminal offense. Generally speaking, the men who were prepared to acknowledge that violence against women happened and who talked about it indicated in some small way that they recognized gender-based violence as a problem, as something that perhaps should not be happening in Indonesian society. Nevertheless, the overall impression is that patriarchal attitudes are slow to change. This discussion pulls together the interview themes to consider some of the main discourses of violence against women.

The Discourse of Denial

We propose that Indonesian men may be silent on the topic of violence against women because (a) violence against women is a topic to be avoided; (b) they are ashamed that such practices occur; (c) violence is so normalized it doesn't register as a significant social event; (d) they are protecting the reputation of their community, ethnicity, or religion; or (e) they just literally do not see or hear it. Perhaps the clue here is the comment by J13, who followed his denial by saying that it is a private matter of households. This confirms the claim by van Klaveren et al. (2010) that "domestic violence is considered a private matter and incidents are underreported" (p. 16).

Most Indonesians, even in urban areas, live close to their neighbors in socially bonded communities. Even if he is concerned about abuse next door, a man might well be reluctant to interfere in his neighbor's household because that would threaten the status and honor of the man in question, and might lead to reciprocal violence against the neighbor and his own household, or to other forms of retribution. The best tactic for maintaining neighborhood harmony is not to notice and not interfere in family or domestic violence, unless it becomes extreme. Silence and denial are key tactics for avoiding recognition that domestic violence takes place.

The Discourse of Blaming the Woman

In her description of tactics for hiding and diminishing male violence against women, Romito (2008) identifies the tactic of blaming the victim: "It is the abused woman who provokes the beating: she argues, disobeys, cooks badly, is untidy and refuses sex" (p. 52). In this discourse, the woman, who is in need of correction, provokes the man's anger. Similarly, a study of battering men in the United States found that men tended to believe that a woman's perceived flaws, including nagging and laziness, justify their violent actions (Mullaney, 2007; see also Dobash & Dobash, 2011). A study of gender-based violence in the province of Aceh, where *Sharia* law has been implemented, found that both men and women blamed women for acts of sexual violence perpetrated against them. It seemed to be presumed that the woman must have done something to provoke the attack (United Nations Food Program [UNFPA], 2005). As indicated in the interview data, women are often suspected of having affairs and this seems to justify men using violence against them. It seems women are always under a cloud of moral suspicion (see Dobash & Dobash, 2011).

The men who articulated the discourse of blaming the woman in the interviews did not necessarily intend to personally offer justifications for violence against women; they were primarily seeking to explain how it came about. They are nevertheless describing justificatory tactics used by men that they recognize in their own communities, families, and circles of friends and acquaintances. Cited provocations to male violence included coming home late, being "weak," refusing to "serve" the husband, demanding more household income, working, neglecting household duties, being accused of having an affair, being angry over a husband's infidelity, and nagging. In the public sphere, women's implied provocations to male violence included being a

sex worker, failing to meet the demands of the boss, breaking up a relationship, mixing with unrelated males, going to the mall, and crying.

In one of the accounts above, the interviewee explained that the man did not fulfill his side of the marriage contract (see Pateman, 1988)—that of the breadwinner—so the wife would not fulfill her contractual obligations, to serve him sexually and meet his household needs. His murderous anger leading to her death is depicted in this account as a logical outcome of his diminished status in the household. The account here is similar to justifications given by men in the study by Dobash and Dobash (2011) of men in the United Kingdom who murder their wives.

In the accounts of interviewees, women were often represented as in need of correction, including reprimands, verbal abuse, and beatings, to make them behave “properly” as wives, girlfriends, and employees. Studies in other parts of the world have produced similar results; for example, in the United Kingdom, “violence is viewed as acceptable when women are defined as ‘out of line’ with the man’s notions of the appropriate behavior for a wife, mother, or housekeeper” (Dobash & Dobash, 2011, p. 114). The “proper” behavior of a wife was implied in interview comments about what women do wrong to provoke male violence. Although there was diversity in the participants’ accounts, broadly the expectation seems to be that the idealized Indonesian wife should obey her husband, put his needs above her own, serve him in all ways, maintain a well-ordered household, and never criticize or demand anything. That is, she should forgive his infidelity and be content with what he provides. This matches the New Order discourse of *kodrat wanita*, indicating that although Indonesia has moved rapidly into the 21st century, with a current economic growth rate of 6.5%, the gender order has been much slower to change.

Solvang (2002) makes the point that in Indonesian cities, women who are on the street after 9:00 p.m. are likely to be “seen as bad women (*perempuan nakal*)” (p. 88). The same point is made by Nilan and Utari (2008) about the work of Indonesian women journalists and media workers. Association with prostitution is so strongly assumed that wives must obtain their husband’s consent to take up night employment. In some areas where local *Sharia* law has been introduced, women are simply not allowed to go out at night. In short, women must work hard at keeping their moral status above suspicion because they, much more so than men, are responsible for maintaining the honor of their families (Idrus & Bennett, 2003). If they move about outside the home with the permission of their husbands, they avoid the risk of public suspicion and shame. Consequently, to maintain respectability, many women defer to their husbands to take responsibility for their movements in the public sphere.

Such cultural practices and values problematize what constitutes “violence” within the family context. For example, the eastern Indonesia study by Bennett et al. (2011) found that social control of women in the home was not regarded by the majority of women as a form of domestic violence. They believed the husband had the right to deny his wife permission to leave the home and to specify the hours she could be away. The authors suggest that this “stems from local interpretations of Islam. Women often explained that according to religion (Islam), a husband’s permission is ideally required before a wife leaves the home” (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 155).

The other tactic identified by Romito (2008) for hiding and diminishing male violence against women is dehumanizing the woman. Men who are violent toward women humiliate and denigrate them using labels that objectify and dehumanize them, for example, “since they are ‘whores’ you can do what you want with them, they deserve beating” (Romito, 2008, p. 49). Several men we interviewed referred to instances of men abusing their girlfriends in public, calling them whores. As another man mentioned, sex workers experience a great deal of violence. The moral gender order in Indonesia constructs women who are even suspected of having sex outside marriage or engaging in “free” social behavior as contemptible and beyond the normal bounds of civil society, providing yet another justificatory discourse for violence against women. In a sense, the social construction of the “wife” is also a dehumanized category in regard to male violence because the actual woman, her feelings, and personal aspirations are less important than her success or otherwise in the functional role of serving the husband.

The Discourse of the Man as Victim

In a study of battering men in the United States, Peralta et al. (2010) point to Messerschmidt’s (1993) proposition that men who are disenfranchised due to socio-economic disadvantage feel emasculated because they cannot fulfill the traditional role of men. In this context, the intimate domain is where control can be regained and masculinity reestablished through exerting power, including the use of violence, over the female partner. This premise seems particularly applicable in Indonesia. Indeed, it was the most popular normalized discourse among the men we interviewed.

In the justificatory discourse of the man as victim, something external to the man and the woman explains his violence against her, through the idea that “the behavior of the man is the result of deep frustration and anxiety” (Romito, 2008, p. 55). Mullaney’s (2007) U.S. study found that violent men often defer responsibility for their actions onto some external set of factors: “the batterer believes the source of the *real* problem to be external to him entirely” (p. 224, emphasis in original). Although there was some limited mention of alcohol (being drunk) as an external factor, the most common discourse pointed to low socioeconomic status and financial stress. Once again, the men who mentioned these factors were not necessarily seeking to justify men’s violent actions, but sought to give an explanation. What they said reveals significant justifying discourses prevalent in Indonesian society and culture.

The logic was that violence against women only happened in poor areas, expressing the idea that poverty causes men to be violent toward women. Many others mentioned financial stress in the household, from a husband’s insufficient income, to work pressure, to a wife earning more than her husband. Men are constructed as the victims here, oppressed by financial stress in their role as husband and breadwinner. In their interviews with battering men in the United States, Peralta et al. (2010) gained the impression that because they felt economically marginalized, the men

had a need to be in control of not only their own lives but also their partners’ lives as well . . .

The use of violence was a way for participants to express to their partners and to the

community at large that control over intimate partners and their social situations were in fact maintained. (pp. 400-401)

The core assumption in this justificatory discourse is once again that the man cannot help his behavior. He is driven to conduct domestic violence by forces external to himself. However, violence against women always involves choice on the part of men.

Looking Toward the Future

The state of gender relations in Indonesia at present is in flux. Although education statistics, labor market trends, and women's public profile indicate that the status of women has improved and is continuing to improve, in the private sphere of marriage and family relations extremely conservative gender roles still seem to prevail. Muslim religious discourse emphasizes the moral purity of women, but not of men, although there are strong feminist voices in some Muslim women's groups. In the popular imagination and in some public rhetoric, women still tend to be blamed for the violence of men toward them, as this article demonstrates, and that discourse is hard to shift.

This article has focused on the viewpoints of Indonesian men specifically, so it is appropriate to end with a brief consideration of contemporary social trends and discourses in Indonesia that may or may not alter men's attitudes toward violence against women. For the sake of brevity, only three trends will be considered. The first is that there is undoubtedly greater awareness now of violence against women as a crime. For example, under the Zero Tolerance Policy on domestic violence, training workshops are required for public servants in many government sectors, and guidelines have been developed for police and medical staff (Bennett et al., 2011).

The second trend is the steady rise of literate women entering the labor market during the current decade of strong economic growth. The Indonesian female labor participation rate in 2008 was 53% and is estimated to have risen further since then. Population growth is slowing and there is a relatively low fertility rate (van Klaveren et al., 2010). Indonesian female workers now earn on average almost 50% of male earnings and women make up the majority of international temporary labor migrants. Yet the dual phenomena of reduced childbearing and increased labor force participation for women do not necessarily imply a decrease in violence against women, as we saw in some of the interview accounts. In fact, it may achieve the reverse. In Indonesia, higher education and high income for women constitute both protective factors and risk factors for domestic violence (Idrus & Bennett, 2003), depending on the circumstances. A well-educated woman in a high-paid job can afford to leave an abusive husband and engage a lawyer to protect both her rights and her children. However, "in some instances, male jealousy over a wife's higher educational and financial status within marriage has been found to compound domestic violence" (Idrus & Bennett, 2003, p. 43), as the account by P12 above indicates.

Nevertheless, the trend does signal a shift in urban areas (now accounting for more than half the population), toward double-income households as a means of gaining family prosperity and a desirable lifestyle. The objective of a double-income

household implicitly favors the “partnership” model of marriage, particularly given the high cost of housing, motor vehicles, home help, and education, where the income of the wife is crucial. The residual discourse of the ideal submissive wife confined to the home under the rule of the husband still lingers, and is favored in fundamentalist religious discourse. However, this “ideal” is implicitly challenged by the new set of economic and labor market circumstances, one in which the female-dominated services sector is growing most rapidly. Spousal partnership within a dual-income household implies a different gender order of marriage, which may encourage men to reevaluate whether they have the right to command and discipline their working wives, and whether it ultimately favors their interests to bully and dominate.

The third trend in the opposite direction is the discourse of hypermasculinity, which favors the objectification of women and the elevation of dominance and violence as qualities to be admired. The discourse of tough, hard, aggressive, and invulnerable masculinity was strongly developed in the militarized State of the New Order, and is mediated in Indonesia today through civil militias, *jihadi* rhetoric, and forms of entertainment and popular culture resources for men, including online combat games and interactive sites. Writing of gendered British colonialism in India, Nandy (1988) emphasized the primarily reactionary nature of hypermasculinity, an exaggerated ideal that arises when local masculine identities are threatened or jeopardized by some form of imperialism. Hypermasculine discourses reclaim the mastery of manhood through denigration and distancing from the self of anything associated with the feminine. For example, as van Wichelen (2009) demonstrates in her account of the new polygamy trend in Indonesia, this amounts to a reaffirmation of hypermasculine discourse in Indonesia, distancing pro-polygamy men from both the West and from any similarity to women and their affective needs within marriage.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed data on violence against women from interviews with Indonesian men as part of a larger project on masculinities and violence in Indonesia and India. Three main justificatory discourses were evident. The first is one of denial: “it doesn’t happen around here.” In crowded Indonesian cities, where everyone but the rich lives at very close quarters, it is perhaps preferable not to see or hear domestic violence as a means of maintaining neighborhood harmony. Men are also sensitive about their family honor and do not appreciate outside intervention from neighbors. The threat of physical violence between men in the defense of honor is always present.

The second discourse was one of blaming the woman if a man is violent toward her, a significant discourse favored by religious conservatives, both Muslim and Christian, in a country where sectarian religious identity claims have never been so important as they are at present. The third discourse was to construct the man as the victim of financial stress or loss of status in relation to a working wife. This implies that Indonesian men cannot readily control their emotions and are easily angered, especially if they feel their honor and authority as a man are threatened.

The implications for policy and practice in light of these findings point to the continued role of government authorities in creating meaningful dialogue and public awareness, especially through joint initiatives taken by the Indonesian ministries for Women's Affairs, Health, and Social Affairs in conjunction with the Ministry of Religion. The findings of this research also point to the highly significant work of relevant NGOs in working with women as victims of gendered violence and with men who want to change. As these NGOs depend largely on overseas donor funding, international aid agencies need to continue to direct their funds to projects that favor the empowerment of women and the reeducation of men.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/school/hss/research/research-grants/masculinities-and-violence.html>. The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle. Surveys were collected from 1,004 men in Indonesia and 1,000 men in India. Interviews were conducted with 86 men in Indonesia and 59 men in India. Interviews were also conducted with 18 nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers in Indonesia and 21 NGO workers in India.
2. Bahasa Indonesia.

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