

Why stigma against victims of domestic violence persists in Indonesia

24 September 2018, by Balawyn Jones



There are many barriers to the implementation of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law. In particular, the community has yet to be adequately educated about domestic violence laws. Author provided

On 22 September 2004, Indonesia enacted the Anti-Domestic Violence Law. This law remains as relevant as ever. The National Commission on Violence Against Women (*Komnas Perempuan*) recently reported that domestic violence is [the most prevalent type of violence against women in Indonesia](#).

The law has been in effect for over a decade, yet there remains widespread impunity for [domestic violence](#) perpetrators and a failure of state mechanisms to protect women.

There are many barriers to the implementation of the law, in particular the failure to adequately educate the community about domestic violence laws.

Violence in the private sphere

The Anti-Domestic Violence Law explicitly identifies domestic violence as a human rights violation. Some people may think that by legislating human rights norms into the domestic sphere the

fight against domestic violence has been won. But this is very much only the beginning.

Some 14 years since the enactment of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, public education efforts, such as the "Stop Kekerasan" campaign by *Pusat Pelayanan Terpadu Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Anak – P2TP2A* (the Centre for Women and Children's Empowerment), have yet to change the public's mindset that domestic violence a "private issue".

The definition of the household in the law includes not only spouses, children and other family members who live together but also domestic workers. The law specifically targets violence in the home. However, many people still consider the household as a "private sphere" under the control of the male head of the household. This leads to victims being stigmatised and silenced.

Victims of domestic violence are stigmatised not necessarily for being abused, but for speaking out about being abused. This has become one of the [the main barriers deterring victims from reporting](#) domestic violence.

What constitutes domestic violence

There is a gap between the legal conceptualisation of domestic violence and the public's understanding of the law. In other words, the public have a different understanding of what constitutes domestic violence from that envisaged by the legislators.

The Anti-Domestic Violence Law defines violence broadly to include physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence (or "negligence"). But, in practice, the public's understanding of non-physical violence as violence is very limited. This corresponds to low reporting rates for psychological, sexual and economic violence.

Despite the broad legal definition, only in cases of severe physical violence do communities recognise domestic abuse as violence and not as a "private issue between husband and wife".

Some community members also try to justify the use of physical violence against women. They argue that, according to local culture and religious interpretations, the male head of the household is responsible for educating his family so a degree of physical violence against women is allowed.

Physical violence is therefore often justified as being "disciplinary" or "educative". This kind of rhetoric minimises the seriousness of violence and emphasises the reciprocity of violence – i.e. blaming the victim for provoking violence.

It is not uncommon for domestic violence perpetrators to try to justify their violence with excuses such as "my wife didn't fulfil her household obligations" or "my wife doesn't listen to me". These views often stem from patriarchal misinterpretations of Islamic doctrine.

In many parts of Indonesia, the authority of the male head of the household produces resistance to government efforts to intervene in the domestic realm to protect women's rights. Physical violence is over-emphasised – sidelining other forms of violence – as well as minimised through attempts to justify violence.

What's next?

Misunderstandings about domestic violence at the community level inevitably impact institutional understandings (for example, of police officers) and affect the implementation of the laws.

Educating the community about domestic violence is important to ensure people understand exactly what constitutes domestic violence. Without proper understanding of the laws, victims are not aware of their rights and they may not be supported by the local community to exercise their rights. In many instances, the local community may actively try to deter victims from reporting domestic violence.

The enactment of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law

was, and is, a huge achievement for the Indonesian women's movement. The implementation of these laws in local and regional contexts is also an achievement – even if there remains room for improvement.

While we celebrate these achievements, we must also look to the future and take stock of the barriers we still need to overcome. In particular the need to improve community understandings of domestic violence and the law.

If you are experiencing domestic [violence](#) and require support contact P2TP2A or Unit Pelayanan Perempuan dan Anak (PPA) Polda in Indonesia, or [local services](#) in Australia.

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