

## CRITICIZING THE SILENCE OF THE RELIGIONS IN ADDRESSING VIOLENCE TOWARD WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

*Theologically, men and women are created equally, as 'Imago Dei'. However in the reality of social-cultural-religion, there are often injustices between the two that leads to violence, especially toward women. The distinction between men and women has brought disadvantages for women over their condition and position in the aspects of social politics, economy as well as culture. Religion, in fact, can also oppress women. This writing is to criticize the role of religious institution in addressing the case of violence toward women. The data are directly obtained from the women and religion institution in Central of Java (Semarang, Salatiga, Yogyakarta) by using in-depth interviews, participatory observation and supported with bibliographical studies. Data analysis is carried out in the descriptive qualitative method.*

**Keywords:** Religion, violence, women

### INTRODUCTION

Violence needs to be understood as a violation toward the basic rights of human as God's creature. In this context, violence toward women can be understood as a violation toward women's right to live their life in dignity. Women actually have the same rights with men to live their life in freedom and dignity. However, there are various forms of violence toward women in the society. Intimidation and fear are the examples of the constraints for women to be able to fully participate in society's activities. Therefore, there should be an effort to solve the problem so that it does not become worse. If there is no solution developed, violence toward women will be a habitude whose cycle cannot be cut.

Conceptually, violence in its various forms indicates the abuse of power, inequality and domination. Violence is a form of power abuse when someone's power is used for forcing or deceiving others and is later manifested in the violation of the integrity and trust of the victim of the abused power. Abuse of power is made possible by status inequality among individuals, groups, religions, and nations.

There are various perception of violence toward women that range from verbal abuse, physical abuse and denial of women's rights (Ihromi, TQ (2000)). In everyday life, whether he is aware or not, a man can say words that are harsh, painful, cornering women, and insulting that can cause fear, pressure and later lead to the absence of self confident in women to develop their lives properly

Women as the victims of violence are never far from us, they are our neighbors, colleagues, or even us. However, we sometimes feel that we are far from them or we even think that there is no relation between violence and our lives although we often eyewitness violence toward women in its various manifestations. Physical, emotional, and psychological, violence whether they are in the domestic scope (at home) or public scope (done by the society, religion, mass media as well as economy, political, and national power). Ironically, violence toward women often becomes a free entertainment that is also often be watched by women

themselves. Women who are the victims of the violence at work are often found among informal sector workers, migrant workers, servants, sex workers, children workforce, prospective employees who are placed in shelters, and also labor activists who are regarded as threats.

This unequal power relation between women and men is generally accepted by women as a common thing and regarded as something appropriate by many men. Only some who regard it as a form of discrimination and as one of the forms of violence toward women. Thus, people need to be aware that the consequence of the discrimination is the violence toward women (Ihromi, TQ (2000).

There is no religion that justifies and accepts violence. Religions possess truth and sanctity, religions also respect and value women because basically religions teach to value human dignity and protection of all creatures as well as to wipe out discrimination, injustice, human right violation and restriction of God's grace that will lead into depravity, destruction, and exploitation toward God's creatures, especially human being. However, so far, the effort of the religions to address violence is, instead of brought to the praxis level, still limited in the normative level, such as in the form of appeal and preaching. It is also quite often that religions take role in conducting and maintaining the violence. The teachings and doctrines of a religion are also often misinterpreted. The interpretation of a religious text textually and partially removes the real message of the text. What makes it worse is that this kind of misinterpretation has been made a reference in the life of the believers that the legitimacy over violence is also justifiable.

Aside from religion, the construction of the society that refers to patriarchal culture has placed men and women as different human beings with different role and status. Society's understanding about women's nature is also often misleading. Women's nature is often be related with house chores that are women's responsibility, which actually is not necessarily connected. Society will regard a woman who does not taking care of the household as denying her nature because this role is regarded as women's nature. In contrast to this, women's natures are only breastfeeding and giving birth. Men and women in fact possess equal rights, roles, status and tasks in all aspects of life.

The main reason of why this writing is brought up is to remind us that the issue of violence toward women is urgent to be addressed, especially by the religions. Religions have not dealt directly with the case of violence toward women such as providing advocacy, pastoral counseling and protection toward the victims. So far the religions have not address this case as what the women Non Government organization (NGO) has done. There are many NGOs that conduct various activities to prevent violence toward women through nurturing, growing awareness, as well as law protection and advocacy (Komnas Perempuan, 2002:200-2001). By being aware that all religions are anti violent, this normative view is enough to be the reason to establish cooperation with women apologist network. If the cooperation can be established, the effectiveness and efficiency of the movement will be stronger and solid in fighting against violence toward women and humanity.

## **THE CORE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE TOWARD WOMEN AS GENDER BASED VIOLENCE**

Violence toward women take place in all aspects in human relation, they are in family relation and the relation with other closest people, at work, as well as in the general social interaction. Aside from that, there are various kinds of violence toward women, ranging from psychological, physical, sexual abuse as well as in economy, culture and religion sector to a part of a massive and strong international organization system (Abdulah Irwan : 2001)

The main point is that all cases of violence toward women are rooted in power inequality between men and women that is supported by the patriarchal values hold by the society in general. Socialization of the positive characteristics of men that emphasize on their courage and assertiveness and that also place men in a higher position from women maintains violence toward women. Men are taught to see women as object complement, unimportant, and can be treated as what they wish (Russel, Lety: 1995). This condition is complemented by the socialization of the positive characteristics in women that emphasize on behaving in submission, in weaknesses, in the context of second class people, and in putting other's interest over their own interests have maintained women's dependency toward men.

So far, religions are accused for allowing injustice toward women because the justification of violence toward women is often legitimated by the verses from the bible of religions, take for example, the case of polygamy. Because the justification is taken from the religions' value, it is not surprising if the society construct their understanding that lead women to emphasize their role as the husbands' partners and caregivers of their children. The attribution of the characteristics along with the myths that downgrading women's dignity are implemented in judging men and women's behavior (Ruseel, Lety: 1995).

Aside from the teaching and verses of the bible, the low sensitivity of gender and gender biased among the religious leaders cause the limited protection toward women from various discrimination and violence. As a result, there are many women who 'give up' in facing this situation. Further, they also say that to be treated unequally is their 'fate'. In addition, when women face their 'task' to fully accompany their husbands and nurture their children, they never have the courage to reject. They will even feel guilty and be blamed by the society when they forget or do not do their duty well. What concerns the most is that women often experience verbal and physical violence from their husbands because they do not do their 'main task'. How pity the women are if this kind of practice take place in the society. Who can be blamed for this? Women, men, culture, society or religious leaders? It is here that the roles of the religion are important. That is why the attitude and behavior of the religious leaders that do not support the effort to stop violence toward women need to be changed in order to provide the security of the justice toward women as the victims of the violence.

Talking about law for the cases of violence toward women, the law framework that comes into effect until now is based mainly on the law of criminal law formulated in the era of colonial that has many weaknesses. The insufficient law substance to protect women from various kinds of violence is an important factor in the lasting of this human right violation as there is no assertive law consequence for those who conduct the violation (Komnas Perempuan, 2002: 200-203) Although we have had a perfect law to protect women from various kinds of discrimination and violence, the low gender sensitivity among the government officers, especially the law enforcers, serves as one of the causes of injustice toward women

With the above explanation, it can be temporarily formulated that the cause of the high violence rate toward women is first, the bias interpretation of religion that tends to subordinate women's position in society, politics, and family. The bias interpretation influences society's understanding and religious behavior. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is also demonstrated by the religion elites. Second, the law products or some policies issued by House of Representatives/government, community organization, and political parties (Marriage Law No.1, 1974 or Inpres [Instruksi Presiden—President Instruction] No.1, 1991 about Kompilasi Hukum Islam [Islamic Law Compilation]) are suspected to be gender biased (Komnas Perempuan, 2002:210)

Third, the minimum sensitivity of religious leaders toward the problem of domestic violence as a public (social) problem and their tendency to only deal with the teachings of doctrine and teaching.

The things above, partially or as a whole, have caused various hindrances toward the effort to stop violence toward women. Enforcing women's right in Indonesia, including the right to live free from violence, cannot be separated from the nation's democratization process that integrates gender equality and justice. Here, we are all aware that the effort to stop violence toward women is not only the responsibility of some men who are concern about gender justice and equality, but also the responsibility of the nation and religion.

### **THE FORMS OF VIOLENCE TOWARD WOMEN**

There are various forms of violence toward women range from psychological, physical, sexual abuses as well as in economy, culture and religion sector to the violence that is a part of a massive and strong international organization system. These forms of violence present in all kinds of women's social relationships, including in family and marriage relationship, at work as well as in other general social interactions. All kinds of violence take place in the community that is in a peaceful state or in the midst of the war or in armed conflict.

#### **Physical Abuse**

In personal relation context, the forms of physical abuse experienced by women include slapping, hitting, tufting, pushing, strangulation, throwing of solid object, torturing using sharp objects such as knife, scissors and burning. At work and social interaction, physical abuses experienced by women are the confinement of prospective workers in shelters and genital mutilation done in the name of culture or particular belief. In armed conflict context, women experience various forms of physical abuse as what experienced by men such as shooting, murder, torturing and kidnapping, house burning or evacuation coercion (Komnas Perempuan 2002: 41)

#### **Mental Abuse**

Psychological harassment toward women is the most common case among women. Ironically, this case is commonly neglected, without any serious willingness to report or address it. Psychological harassment experienced by women includes sustained invective and insult aimed at downgrading ones' self esteem, snaps and threat aimed at raising fear, prohibition to go out of the house or other restrictions on the freedom to move.

Arbitrary treatment that causes women to experience fear and lose their freedom because of many rules implemented in the household that restrict women's movement and freedom are also the forms of abuse that cannot be left unaddressed, especially at home. Most of torturing takes place in personal interaction. Psychological pressure toward women is also implemented to women political prisoners such as in the process of interrogation and the compulsory to report that is so depressing (Komnas Perempuan:2002:41).

#### **Economic Deprivation**

One of the violation experienced by women is, especially wives or housewives is when they are not given routine living or not given enough amount of living to fulfill the daily needs. Women, who do not work, therefore, do not have the right and freedom to use the money given by the husband. In this case, women are expected to 'cope' with whatever amount of money given by the husbands (Komnas Perempuan : 2002: 42). This condition is also a form of violence toward women, especially when the women are blamed by the husband if they cannot manage the money given to fulfill the daily needs.

Violence toward women also happens to women under investigation or those who are prohibited to work in a particular condition that contradicts the women's desire. Meanwhile, the women who work are regarded only as "complement" that women's income is not appreciated (Komnas Perempuan: 2002: 42-43)

### **Discrimination**

Women experience many forms of discrimination, whether at home or at work. In the family context, for example, women are often excluded from receiving inheritance, given limited chance to get the freedom in developing self existence and actualization. Discrimination in education is also done by the family with sons and daughters. Education is only for boys, whereas girls do not need high level of education. This restriction and discrimination toward women results in the fact that there are only boys who have good education in the family. The common understanding that women will only be housewives strengthens the paradigm that women do not need high level of education (Komnas Perempuan, 2002: 42).

Discrimination also takes place among working women. Salary system between men and women is different. Women are paid lower than men even though they do the same job. Therefore, companies prefer women as the employee (Komnas Perempuan: 2002: 42).

### **THE ROLE OF RELIGIONS IN ANTICIPATING VIOLENCE TOWARD WOMEN**

At present, women as the victim of violence almost rarely get justice both from formal and religious institution. In this case, religious institutions are important and relevant to promote prevention toward violence toward women.

It is reasonable if religious institutions are said to be the first place for women who are the victim of violence to report. Aside from that, religious institutions are also the final shelter for the violence victims when they have no protection. Is it really the fact? Women longing for "protection" and advocacy from religious institutions often experience violence (Komnas Perempuan, 2002: 178-180). The examples are what happen in Christian community. Priests usually refuse to baptize children of rape victims (Lakawa Septemmy (2000)). It is ironical since baptism is ones' recognition as church members. Even though the child of a raped woman is later baptized, the mother is not allowed to take part in church sacraments and she is put under "church strategy" or special supervision. It does not stop there, the suffering of the women victims are increasing when the churches that are supposed to be shelters and protectors in fact announce the fault of the victims in front of the congregations. This is because some churches adopt the rule to "tell" the mistakes done by believers in front of the congregations. The victim is then put under special supervision and church strategy in the effort of healing and restoring him/her in the congregation. This process often leads to hard psychological burden for the person. This burden is made worse by the unfriendly acceptance from the congregations and discrimination toward people who experience violence, such as a rape victim (Lakawa Septemmy (2000)).

Comprehensive acceptance of the violence victim is a grace and strength for the victims. When the women are accepted and are not differentiated from others over the violence they experience, they experience justice that brings new hope and strength for the violence victims. The case above is one of the other thousand examples showing that religious institutions that are supposed to provide the final protection for the violence victims do not function as they are expected if compared to formal law institutions such as police, court, and etc.

Therefore, it is clearer that religious figures and religious institutions are two elements with important roles in the life of the believers. Instructions, suggestion, and appeal of religious

figures and religious institutions can be a strength traced by the follower. It is very important to develop the critical thinking of religious figures in improving the role of religious institutions in preventing violence and healing the women who are the victims of violence. Religions are supposed to accept the violence victims as pearls, not as convicts who need to be avoided, indeed, as people who need to be given full attention (Lakawa Septemmy : 2000)

### **PARADIGM SHIFT**

There need to be some changes in the paradigm that tends to identify religions as one of the source of violence toward women. Religions are accused of the cause of the abuse, oppression, and injustice toward women. Religionists are said to have misinterpreted the doctrines, teachings, and bible texts that marginalize the role of women in the religion. This is the old paradigm. However, know new paradigm that sees the relation between women and religions in a more positive way has been developed. At least, concerns about violence toward women lead to the emergence of religious society and development of various alliances to strive for women's dignity. In this point, religions are expected to fight for the dignity of the women who are experiencing violence and oppression that women will no longer be the "objects" of theology but the "subject" of theology (Maria Clara Bingge, 1989:474).

### **CONCLUSION**

Violence toward women has been a counter culture phenomenon. Therefore the synergy of religious institutions, government, women NGOs, and religious leaders along with the women who are the victims of violence need to be striven in order to fight against violence. It can later be a cultural movement against violence, not only toward women, but also toward human being that needs to be hold in high esteem, maintained, and enforced in a civilized manner. In the context of violence toward women, it is not only women who are supposed to long to stop the violence, but it will be wonderful if religious institutions, religious leaders, and or religious figures participate in build networking that defend women. The synergy between religion and women apologist network will maximize the effort to conduct gender education and training. It is only through this effort that gender justice is enforced and the advocacy on gender injustice will be more empowered.

Therefore, a question that always needs to be asked is how religion can provide a just, peaceful, and bright environment for life as a means to fight against violence. The world will be wonderful when women as the majority in this nation obtain a just treatment and are liberated from discrimination.

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