

The dynamics of forgiveness in female victims of domestic violence (DV) who remain in marriage

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) is a serious problem that has a wide-ranging impact, especially on victims. The majority of domestic violence victims are women. This study aims to explore the dynamics of forgiveness in wives of domestic violence victims who still live with their husbands. The sampling technique in this study used purposive sampling with the criteria of women who are victims of domestic violence; experiencing violence for more than two years; still living at home with the perpetrator; still a wife; still getting domestic violence treatment; domiciled in Magelang Regency; still in marriage with the perpetrator; and willing to participate in this study. This research uses descriptive qualitative method conducted with in-depth interviews to understand the forgiveness process that participants go through. The results showed that victims of domestic violence experience three types of forgiveness: hollow forgiveness, silent forgiveness, and total forgiveness. The forgiveness process involves a change in motivation from avoidance and revenge to doing good, although the relationship remains variable in terms of marital continuity. In conclusion, although victims choose to forgive, abusive relationships make the forgiveness process complex. The implications of this study suggest the importance of appropriate interventions in supporting victims of domestic violence to understand and process forgiveness in a healthy manner.

Keywords

Domestic violence, Forgiveness dynamics, Hollow forgiveness, Silent forgiveness, Total forgiveness

Introduction

A harmonious and happy marriage is the dream of every couple who decides to get married. Harmony in the household is created by good communication, mutual understanding, and support for each other [1]. Happiness in marriage is not only formed from togetherness and love, but also from the couple's ability to overcome various challenges that arise, such as differences of opinion, economic problems, and roles in the household [2].

However, not all marriages go as expected. Behind a seemingly happy home life, there are couples who face serious problems, one of which is domestic violence. Domestic

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violence is a real threat to marital harmony, where violence, whether physical, verbal, or psychological, can destroy a couple's trust, sense of security, and happiness [3]. This can be seen from the increasing cases of domestic violence in Indonesia from year to year.

In 2024, data on the number of violence against women and children in Indonesia experienced a significant increase compared to previous years. Based on data collected from 1 January to 14 August 2024, there were 15,490 cases of violence. The case reports were dominated by cases of domestic violence (KDRT) with a total of 9,503 cases (Kemen-PPPA, 2024). Based on data from 2023, the number of violence against women totalled 289,111 cases. This shows that the number of violence against women has decreased compared to 2022 by 12% or around 55,920 cases. In addition, CATAHU 2023 also explained that there was an increase in violence against women in the state and public spheres, where violence in the state sphere increased by 176% and in the public sphere by 44% [4].

Domestic violence is violence that occurs within the family, causing physical, sexual, or psychological suffering or neglect [5]. Its causes can stem from economic problems, incompatibility, infidelity, dominance by the husband, and outside interference [6]. The impacts of domestic violence can be physical or psychological, such as stress, low self-esteem, trauma, and fear that hinder the victim's daily activities [7,8]. Deep trauma, financial dependence, societal stigma, and fear of the perpetrator often lead victims to stay in abusive relationships, despite the negative effects on their mental health [6,9].

This is in line with data from the NGO Sahabat Perempuan in Magelang District, which notes that the trend of domestic violence cases in the last five years (2020-2024) has fluctuated around 15-20%, with a significant increase during the pandemic of 25% due to economic and social pressures. Despite this, most victims choose to stay in a marital relationship rather than separate. The main reason is financial dependency, where victims feel unable to support themselves and their children if they separate. Other factors such as fear of losing child custody, social and family pressure, and religious and cultural considerations that prioritise family unity also influence victims' decisions. This leads to many victims staying put despite having to endure ongoing physical and emotional suffering.

The results of a preliminary study conducted on two female victims of domestic violence, namely Mrs SR and Mrs W. Participant 1 (SR) aged 35 years, experienced violence in the form of physical violence and psychological violence that occurred at least twice a week. Physical violence experienced such as beating and slapping which resulted in bruises and physical injuries. Meanwhile, the psychological violence that was obtained was in the form of swearing and harsh words. This caused the participant to feel traumatised, hurt, depressed and anxious about the actions of the perpetrator. Participant 2 (W), 41 years old, experienced violence in the form of psychological violence that occurred every day and domestic neglect. Psychological violence experienced in the form of intimidation and swearing. Meanwhile, household neglect

experienced in the form of no livelihood given. This caused participants to feel helpless, hurt, stressed and angry. Both participants explained that initially they felt forced to stay with their husbands. However, over time, both of them began to accept and forgive their husband's behaviour, although with various reasons such as protecting the children's mentality and believing that the husband would change. From the explanations of the two participants, it can be seen that there are aspects of forgiveness carried out by victims against perpetrators of domestic violence.

Forgiveness is a psychological process in which a person reduces negative emotions such as revenge and hatred, then strives to reconcile, do good, and restore their psychological condition [10–12]. In the context of forgiveness, victims of domestic violence choose to forgive the perpetrator with the hope of alleviating conflict in the relationship and maintaining family unity. [10] states that forgiveness can ease negative emotions such as anger and resentment, which can improve the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Although forgiveness may help reduce conflict, it does not mean the victim has fully recovered or that the relationship will improve [6]. In some cases, forgiveness merely becomes a survival mechanism for victims who feel they have no other choice.

Forgiveness can be an important step in maintaining the mental health of domestic violence victims, even though it may seem unfair to forgive someone who has caused harm. Forgiveness is not only for the perpetrator's benefit but also for freeing oneself from negative emotions such as resentment and hatred [12]. This process, as stated by [13], is like climbing a steep mountain, requiring mental readiness and strong determination. The phenomenon of domestic violence is interesting to explore further, as victims often forgive for personal reasons, such as preserving the family or alleviating emotional pain. Research on forgiveness in the context of domestic violence is essential, as the dynamics of forgiveness in abusive marital relationships are distinct from other relationship contexts [11].

Based on this background, the researcher wants to further explore the dynamics of forgiveness in female victims of domestic violence (DV) who are still in marriage. The difference between this research and previous research is related to relationship status, where previous research focused on the dynamics of forgiveness in divorced victims of domestic violence. Meanwhile, this study aims to examine the dynamics of forgiveness in victims of domestic violence who still survive in marital status. The impact of this research is expected to be a reference for understanding the psychological conditions of women who are victims of domestic violence. So that it can be a reference for designing psychological capacity building programmes for victims of domestic violence.

Methods

Research design

Researchers use qualitative research, which is research conducted by analysing data and interpreting the text of interview results which aims to find the meaning of a phenomenon [14]. The qualitative descriptive approach is used by researchers to obtain an in-depth, detailed and comprehensive understanding of information related to the dynamics of *forgiveness* in female victims of domestic violence (KDRT) who still survive in marriage.

Participants

In this study, interviews were conducted with three participants with the main criteria, namely female victims of domestic violence, who had experienced violence for more than 2 years, still living at home with their husbands, still a wife, still experiencing domestic violence, domiciled in Magelang Regency and willing to participate in this study. The selection of participants was carried out by *purposive sampling*, namely looking for participants according to the criteria set by the researcher [14]. Before conducting the research process, the researcher provided *informed consent* as a form of the willingness of the resource person to become a participant in the study. Additionally, in the writing, the participants' names were anonymized using initials to ensure data confidentiality as a part of ethical guidelines.

Data collection

The data collection technique in this study used in-depth interviews. In-depth interview is a way of collecting data or information by directly meeting face to face with informants in order to obtain complete and in-depth data. In this study, researchers used a type of semi-structured interview, namely by asking open-ended questions to obtain and explore in-depth information about the dynamics of *forgiveness* in female victims of domestic violence (KDRT) who still survive in marriage. The interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings with the informants, lasting approximately 1 hour, and were held at the office of the NGO Sahabat Perempuan.

The interview guide in this study was prepared based on [10] forgiveness theory, which explains that the dynamics of forgiveness consist of changes in three main motivations, namely avoidance, revenge, and benevolence. The forgiveness process goes through four stages, namely hurt, hate, healing, and finally, coming together or achieving inner peace. Factors that influence forgiveness include empathy, attribution towards the perpetrator and their actions, the level of grief experienced by the victim, the victim's personality characteristics, and the quality of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.

Data analysis

Data analysis in this study consists of several stages, namely: 1) Researchers collected data conducted by means of interviews (data collection); 2) Researchers select, simplify

and convert raw data into a form that makes it easy to analyse (data reduction); 3) The researcher then organised and presented the data in a more meaningful way to help show patterns, relationships or themes (data display); 4) The researcher began to draw final conclusions based on the results of the previous stages, identifying emerging themes and understanding the information (conclusion drawing) [15].

Results and Discussion

Results

This study used three participants who were clients at the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Sahabat Perempuan Magelang. Participant 1 (KA) experienced physical violence, psychological violence and domestic neglect which resulted in feelings of trauma, fear, anxiety, sadness, heartache, feeling helpless, not strong enough to undergo marriage and a bruised body. Participant 2 (S) experienced psychological violence and physical violence which resulted in feelings of hurt, depression, often blaming herself, crying, tired and ignorant of her husband. Participant 3 (EV) experienced physical violence, psychological violence and domestic neglect. This resulted in EV experiencing bruises, physical pain, feeling unsafe and uncomfortable, fear, sadness, trauma, pressure and heartache. The description of domestic violence behaviour in the participants of this study is outlined in [Table 1](#).

In this study, the dynamics of forgiveness in the three victims of domestic violence showed various responses from each participant. The first participant (KA) chose to stay with her husband in the hope of change, while the second (S) and third (EV) participants showed a desire to separate and seek refuge. [Table 2](#) illustrates the differences in avoidance, revenge, and benevolence motivations that influenced the forgiveness process in the three participants, reflecting the complexity of their emotions and attitudes towards the situation at hand.

The stages of forgiveness in the three participants who are victims of domestic violence are divided into four, namely hurt, hate, healing, and come together. At the hurt stage, the victim feels hurt by her husband's behaviour. In the hate stage, although disappointed, the victim does not feel hate and has no desire for revenge. Then, at the healing stage, the participant began to accept the husband's condition that might not be as expected, and tried to be sincere and forget the husband's mistakes. Finally, at the coming together stage, the victim decided to maintain the marriage because she felt sorry for her husband and worried about her future if she divorced. An overview of the stages of forgiveness that participants go through can be seen in [Table 3](#).

Various factors that influence forgiveness in the three participants who are victims of domestic violence include empathy, attribution, level of grief, personality characteristics, and relationship quality. Empathy is seen from feelings of pity and concern for the husband's condition. In terms of attribution, participants considered that the husband still had a good side and believed that the husband could change.

Although the three participants felt pain and hurt, the belief that the husband would change became the main impetus to survive. Personality characteristics such as sincerity and prayer also play a role in the forgiveness process. Finally, relationship quality was characterised by a high commitment to the marriage, despite not receiving maintenance and experiencing violence. An overview of these forgiveness factors can be seen in [Table 4](#).

The reasons for forgiving and staying in the marriage despite experiencing domestic violence reflect the complexity of emotions and hopes for change in the three participants. In this case, participants tried to accept their partner's situation and believed that God is the most forgiving, so they felt the need to forgive mistakes. In addition, although they still hold wounds, the three participants try to give their partners the opportunity to change, especially for the sake of maintaining the mental health of their children so that they do not experience a broken home. Meanwhile, positive thinking that the partner would change and the belief to remain devoted were also important factors. Feeling sorry for their partner and worrying about their fate if divorce occurred were significant reasons for the decision to stay. A further overview of the reasons for forgiving and staying can be seen in [Table 5](#).

The types of forgiveness experienced by the three domestic violence victim participants showed variations in emotional responses to the trauma experienced. This study identified three types of forgiveness: first, hollow forgiveness, where the individual still harbours pain but attempts to forgive; second, silent forgiveness, which reflects a tacit attitude of forgiveness although pain remains; and third, total forgiveness, where the individual sincerely forgives all violent acts from the partner. These types reflect different emotional recovery processes among victims. Further explanation can be seen in [Table 6](#).

Relationship sustainability in all three participants was choosing to stay in the marriage. Despite the challenges and deep pain of domestic violence, all three remained committed to maintaining the relationship. This demonstrates resilience and hope for future improvements, despite significant emotional sacrifices. An overview of the participants' relationship sustainability can be seen in [Table 7](#).

Discussion

The results of this study provide an overview of the various forms of domestic violence experienced by wives, including physical violence, psychological violence and domestic neglect. Physical violence includes slapping and beating of body parts such as the head, face and back. While the forms of psychological violence that occur include being berated, angry with harsh words and animal words. In addition, the wives of victims of domestic violence also experienced violence in the form of household neglect, which included not being given physical and mental support, the wife had to work to support her husband and children, while the husband was busy getting drunk, gambling and having an affair. In this case, the husband also prohibits the wife from leaving the house,

socialising outside and is not allowed to work, but the husband also cannot provide for the family.

Despite the domestic violence committed by their husbands, the wives of domestic violence victims were able to stay in a marriage bond for 10 to 31 years. [16] in his research explains that wives who experience domestic violence by their husbands are able to survive because of several factors, such as surviving to maintain the mental condition of the child, the feeling of fear of the perpetrator, the belief and hope that the perpetrator can change, and the religious and cultural factors to maintain the bond of marriage. Based on the findings and analysis of the interviews that have been conducted, the reason why wives stay in marriage is because of children. Two of the three participants revealed that the reason for staying in the household despite experiencing domestic violence by their husbands was their children. Both of them do not want their children to experience mental health problems and feel broken home as a result of the divorce of both parents. In addition to children, the three participants also explained the belief that divorce is not good in religion, and the hope that the husband will get guidance to change. In addition, the feeling of pity for the husband and in-laws is also the reason why wives choose to stay in marriage.

The survival of victims of domestic violence (DV) can be explained through the cycle of violence theory which consists of three stages, namely: first, the emergence of tension; second, the acute violence stage; and third, the honeymoon phase [17]. In the initial stage, tensions begin to rise, characterised by domestic disputes and mild violence. However, in the second stage, the violence becomes more severe, such as beating, slapping, pushing, strangulation, or even the use of weapons to attack. After the violence subsides, the perpetrator often feels remorseful and shows good behaviour by wooing, apologising and promising not to repeat the act [18].

Violence committed by husbands against their wives in domestic violence can result in various impacts, ranging from physical impacts to psychological impacts. Physical impacts can include bruises, inability to move and back pain that results in being unable to move for days. This is in line with [19] explanation, that physical violence committed by the perpetrator can have an impact on the victim, such as physical injuries, fainting, chronic diseases and back pain and injuries to other limbs. Meanwhile, the psychological impact of violence includes negative affect which can be in the form of feelings of disappointment, sadness, trauma, depression, heartache, feeling helpless, constantly blaming yourself and not being strong enough to survive in marriage. The existence of various negative affects as above, can encourage wives to avoid their husbands by leaving the house, keeping their distance from their husbands, seeking protection through legal institutions and women's protection institutions, and the desire to separate.

The psychological impact caused by the violence committed by the husband to the wife also encourages the wife's desire for revenge. The various things that wives do for revenge are by fighting their husbands' words, wanting to avenge their husbands'

actions and leaving home. This is in line with the research of [20], that the presence of feeling hurt perceive attack in the form of feelings of worry and fear can result in avoidance motivation such as avoiding the perpetrator and righteous indignation which is a feeling of disgust and anger that makes the victim choose revenge motivation, namely the motivation to take revenge.

Despite experiencing domestic violence (KDRT) repeatedly, victims often forgive their perpetrators. This is influenced by child factors and changes in the husband's attitude after committing violence, such as showing guilt by wooing and being kind to the wife such as taking holidays and dinner out. Even though the violence occurred repeatedly, the wife still apologised. This is also driven by the belief that if she does not forgive her husband, then her prayers to God will not be answered, and the fear that God will not forgive her if she does not forgive her husband. In addition, the values believed in the role of the wife also emphasise the importance of forgiving the husband.

In some cases, wives who experienced domestic violence managed to turn negative impulses such as anger and desire for revenge into more positive actions, such as opening communication with their husbands and preparing all their husband's needs such as work supplies, food and drinks. This positive change was triggered by a situation where the husband began to apologise, talk, and show good behaviour. [10] states that situations where the perpetrator apologises to the victim can influence the victim to forgive their partner. When husbands apologise after committing violence, wives then tend to forgive in the hope that their husbands will change. However, despite the hope for change, the reality is that violent behaviour often reoccurs, keeping the victim trapped in the same cycle of violence.

This research also reveals the dynamics of forgiveness that involve a change from avoidance motivation and revenge motivation to benevolence motivation. This change is influenced by several factors, including empathy, attribution, level of grieving, personality characteristics, and relationship quality. Empathy felt by victims of domestic violence towards their husbands often arises from pity and concern for the husband's condition, although it is not always supported by data showing positive changes in the husband. Victims usually perceive their husbands as good people when they are not angry or violent, although in some cases there are those who think that their husbands have negative traits, such as narcissistic tendencies.

The level of grief felt by the victims varied. Some victims felt very hurt and wounded, but still hoped that their husbands would one day change. There are also those who feel the hurt so deeply that it is physical, such as a tightness in the chest, but still try to accept their husband's shortcomings. Personality characteristics also play an important role in the forgiveness process, where victims who are patient and make efforts with prayer for their husband's change still try to carry out their obligations as a wife despite the stressful conditions. In addition, the quality of the relationship they maintain is often based on a high level of commitment to the marriage. Although some victims had considered or even attempted divorce, they still tried to maintain the relationship, even

without getting a proper livelihood and experiencing constant violence. Some had left home, but eventually returned and tried to repair the relationship because there was still a desire to maintain the marriage. This process is in line with the definition put forward by M. McCullough and Emmons [21] that forgiveness is related to emotions, thoughts, and behaviour, where a person can reduce negative judgments towards people who have hurt them.

[10] states that forgiveness is not only related to changes in motivation, but also involves a shift towards prosocial motivation. Thus, individuals who are able to forgive will reduce the urge to avoid and take revenge by acting better. Rusbult (in [10]) adds that the shift towards prosocial motivation occurs due to accommodation and the desire to sacrifice. In this study, the wife's willingness to work and earn a living shows that there is a desire for the wife to sacrifice in the domestic violence relationship. This study also found that wives experienced domestic violence from their husbands, but they still showed good intentions and behaviours to serve their husbands, for example by preparing food for their husbands and children. These good intentions can be considered a form of benevolence motivation, which is the desire to reconcile and maintain the relationship. However, serving the husband, such as preparing food, is actually part of the wife's obligations in the household. This is in line with Kartono's view, which states that one of the roles and responsibilities of a wife is to take care of and do household chores [22].

The stages of forgiveness experienced by victims of domestic violence in this study show complex emotional dynamics. At the hurt stage, victims feel hurt and sadness due to their husband's abusive behaviour and treatment. However, some victims do not harbour hatred and have no intention of taking revenge, although there are some who have thought about ending their marriage due to their husband's treatment. These negative feelings were accompanied by victims' efforts to accept their husbands' circumstances, such as their husbands not working, and trying not to remember the mistakes that had been made. They also try to be sincere and continue to make efforts so that the household relationship can be maintained. Smith [23] states that learning to forgive others who have done wrong and hurt is difficult, but very important and meaningful.

At the healing stage, victims tried to understand their husband's emotional state and chose to remain silent rather than escalate the conflict. Some victims try to forget their husband's mistakes and try to understand him more deeply, although the hurt is still there. Finally, at the coming together stage, the victims decided to maintain the household, this was due to a sense of heartlessness towards the husband. They feel worried about how their husband's life will be if the marriage ends in divorce. Thus, victims try to forgive their husbands' mistakes and endeavour to maintain the integrity of the household, even though they have to bear a heavy emotional burden. Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer (in [24]) explained that this combination reflects an attitude in which a person has shown forgiveness and does not hold a grudge against

things that hurt him, so that the relationship between the two parties can be maintained as before.

In this study, the reasons for victims of domestic violence to forgive and stay in marriage varied greatly. Some victims forgive their husbands by trying to accept their husband's condition and believe that Allah is the Most Forgiving, so as His servants they feel obliged to forgive their husband's mistakes. There are also those who have not been able to fully forgive because of the wounds they still feel in their hearts, but they try to forget and give their husbands a chance to change. The husband's apology and promise to change was one of the incentives for the victims to forgive. Some victims held on to the belief that as wives, they should be devoted to their husbands and fulfil their spiritual obligations. The reasons for staying in the marriage also varied. Some victims felt sorry if they divorced their husbands because they had no family and they had lived together for many years. There are also those who stay to protect their children mentally so that they do not experience a broken home. In addition, the full support of family, in-laws, and friends as well as religious beliefs are also reasons for victims to continue to maintain their marriages despite difficult conditions.

There are three types of forgiveness experienced by victims. Some experience hollow forgiveness, where they still hold the pain in their hearts, but try to forgive. In addition, there are also those who experience silent forgiveness, where the pain is still there but the victim has forgiven her husband silently. Some victims achieve total forgiveness, where they truly forgive all acts of violence committed by their husbands. However, the sustainability of their relationships was the same, with all three victims deciding to stay in the marriage despite feeling emotionally exhausted.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this study shows that victims of domestic violence experience various forms of violence ranging from physical, psychological violence and also domestic neglect, but still stay in marriage because of child factors, hopes for change in their husbands, and religious values that encourage forgiveness. The process of forgiveness involves a shift from avoidance and revenge motivations to kindness, which is influenced by empathy, attribution, and victim characteristics. Three types of forgiveness were found, namely hollow forgiveness, silent forgiveness, and total forgiveness, with sustainability persisting in the marital relationship. The study recommends the development of more in-depth interventions as well as further studies on husbands' perceptions to help break the cycle of domestic violence effectively. A limitation of this study is the limited sample size which may affect the ability to generalise the results, so the findings may not fully represent the experiences of all domestic violence victims.

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