

Why Do Female Victims Of Domestic Violence Rarely Report It? A Literature Review

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Abstract

The low rate of reporting domestic violence (DV) by women remains a serious problem in efforts to protect victims and enforce the law in Indonesia. This phenomenon cannot be understood solely as an individual decision by the victim, but the result of various intertwined structural and cultural factors. This study aims to analyze the reasons why women victims of DV are reluctant to report the violence they experience using a sociological perspective on law. This study uses a qualitative literature review method by analyzing dozens of national and international journal articles published between 2021 and 2025, as well as reports from relevant institutions on issues of DV, reporting, and law enforcement. The literature was analyzed thematically to identify patterns in findings between studies, particularly those related to culture, gender, social structure, and law enforcement practices. The results of the study show that the low reporting rate of domestic violence is influenced by patriarchal culture, gender inequality, the economic dependence of victims, and social stigma against women who report abuse. In addition, legal factors play a significant role through the gap between legal norms and implementation practices, obstacles to proving cases, a tendency toward mediation, and the low institutional capacity of law enforcement agencies, which are not yet fully gender-sensitive. These conditions increase the risk of secondary victimization and undermine victims' trust in the legal system. This study emphasizes that increasing the reporting of DV requires implementative reforms that focus not only on regulations, but also on legal culture and strengthening victim protection.

1. Introduction

The escalation in the number of reports of violence against women as shown from Komnas Perempuan data in 2023 as many as 289,111 cases and an increase of 14.17% to 330,097 cases in 2024 shows that this event is very "Catahu 2024: Organizing Data, Sharpening the Direction: Reflections on Documentation and Trends in Cases of Violence Against Women," Komnas Perempuan, 2025; "Annual Report on the Work of Komnas Perempuan in 2023 - Preparing the Steps Forward," Komnas Perempuan, 2024, <https://komnasperempuan.go.id/laporan-kelembagaan-detail/laporan-tahunan-hasil-kerja-komnas-perempuan-tahun-2023-menyiapkan-langkah-ke-depan?worrying>. A report from Komnas Perempuan shows that a large proportion of women's violence is in the personal or domestic sphere "Annual Report on the Work of Komnas Perempuan in 2023 - Preparing the Steps Forward.". This number includes various forms of violence, ranging from physical, psychological, sexual, to economic violence. In fact, from the escalation of the case, legal experts and observers believe that the figure only represents a small part of the cases that actually occur in the reality in society, considering that there are still high cases of domestic violence that are not identified or reported through official mechanisms.

The most common but least reported gender-based violence is domestic violence. Komnas Perempuan classifies the "personal domain", which includes violence against wives, violence in intimate relationships, violence against girls in the family, and violence between other household members, as one of the main categories in the data collection of cases. The high proportion of violence that occurs in this realm shows that the household, which is ideally a safe space, has the potential to be the most vulnerable space for women to experience violence. However, not all cases of domestic violence are included in official statistics, because victims often face several obstacles including cultural, psychological, structural, and legal that make them reluctant to report.

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The problem of obstacles for female domestic violence victims in reporting is not only related to individual decisions, but before making these decisions, the victims are first influenced by larger structural factors. There is an inherent patriarchal cultural dominance in society, which results in other negative consequences such as gender inequality, economic dependence, lack of mentoring, and low trust in legal mechanisms. From the perspective of legal sociology, this shows the imoptimality of the function of law as an instrument and social control. Although, in positive law, Law No. 23 of 2004 concerning the Elimination of Domestic Violence has been provided, but it turns out that its effectiveness is still constrained by the legal culture of the community, social structure, and the response of the law enforcement officials.

Thus, it is important to examine why women victims of domestic violence are reluctant to report the violence they experience, as well as how culture, gender, and social structures interact in shaping these patterns of non-reporting. This study not only provides a more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics in domestic violence cases, but is also relevant to evaluate the effectiveness of women's protection policies and develop assistance strategies that are more responsive to the needs of victims.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a secondary data analysis method to examine the factors that affect the low reporting of domestic violence (KDRT). Data sources include the 2023–2024 National Commission on Women's Education, related regulations such as Law No. 23 of 2004, articles in national and international journals, as well as reports of service institutions and other relevant academic publications. All documents were selected based on their level of credibility and relevance to cultural themes, gender, social structure, and the dynamics of law enforcement in the context of domestic violence.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify key patterns and categories related to reporting barriers. The findings were then interpreted through the perspective of legal sociology to understand the relationship between social construction, legal culture, and regulatory effectiveness. Method is a part consists of the design of the research, subject, instrument, data collection procedure, and data analysis.

2.1. Cultural, Gender, and Social Structure Factors as Causes of Low Domestic Violence Reporting

3.1.1 Normalization of Violence and the Construction of Patriarchal Culture

Various empirical studies in Indonesia show that domestic violence is often seen as part of domestic dynamics that are inappropriate to be disclosed to the public. In field research conducted in several urban and semi-urban areas, it was found that many women interpret acts of violence as a "family affair" that should not be interfered with by others. This value is reinforced by the assumption that the husband is the leader of the household, so that coercive or controlling actions are considered a form of coaching. The study confirms that patriarchal norms shape the way women understand violence, which is not as a violation of rights, but as something normal in marital relationships. These findings are supported by one of the empirical analyses that shows that women often delay or refuse reporting for fear of being perceived as against their social roles as wives and mothers (Sari & Putri, 2021).

In another study on family relations, it was found that women who tried to report often faced pressure from extended families to maintain their household in order to maintain a good name. The study showed that many victims were persuaded to "not embarrass the family", so reporting was seen as an act that violated norms of decency. In this context, the family becomes the actor who reinforces the culture of silence, not the actor who supports the victim (Lasmini & Marweny, 2025).

Thus, culture is not merely a social setting, but a structure that actively produces reporting barriers through moral legitimacy, social pressure, and traditional conceptions of family harmony. Some studies shows that strong patriarchal culture has made women feel inferior, even oppressed (Wahyudi, 2025b, 2025a; Wahyudi et al., 2023; Wahyudi, Ariani, et al., 2025; Wahyudi, Ibrahim, et al., 2025). So it influences how women make decision, in this case about reporting domestic violence.

3.1.2. Economic Dependency and Structural Barriers

Economic dependency is one of the most significant factors that cause women to be reluctant to report abuse. Studies on the handling of domestic violence cases by law enforcement officials show that many women are economically powerless and completely dependent on their husbands' income. In such circumstances, reporting is considered risky because it could lead to the perpetrator's arrest, leaving no one to provide for the family's economic needs. This causes many victims to remain in abusive relationships for the sake of their children's survival (Arif et al., 2025).

In addition, community-level research shows that even when victims are employed, their income is often unstable or significantly lower than that of the perpetrator. These studies confirm that economic inequality puts victims in a weak bargaining position when considering reporting. Fear of losing their home, daily necessities, and uncertainty about the future make reporting seem too risky an option (Sutrisno et al., 2024).

Other studies show that in some cases, reports are actually made by third parties—relatives, neighbors, or community leaders—because the victims themselves do not dare to report even though they have experienced severe violence. However, when legal proceedings are underway, many victims refuse to continue because they are concerned about the impact on their family's economic situation. This shows that reporting domestic violence is not only a matter of courage, but is closely related to the economic structure of the household (Lasmini & Marweny, 2025).

3.1.3. Psychological Trauma, Cycle of Violence, and Emotional Control

Psychological factors also play an important role in low reporting rates. In a study on the dynamics of report withdrawal, it was found that many victims withdrew their reports after the perpetrator showed remorse or offered reconciliation. The cycle of violence—tension, violence, apology, and "honeymoon"—leads victims to hope that the perpetrator will change. However, this pattern repeats itself and often puts the victim in even greater danger (Barocas et al., 2020).

In addition, several studies show that victims experience deep trauma that makes them feel unable to seek help. Fear of threats from perpetrators, especially threats of further violence or murder (femicide), is a powerful reason why victims choose to remain silent. Studies on extreme violence against partners show that the risk of death actually increases when victims try to report or leave the perpetrator. This kind of fear weakens victims' motivation to pursue legal action (Jamilah, 2019). From a social psychology perspective, this phenomenon illustrates a condition of learned helplessness, where victims feel that reporting will not change the situation, trapping them in a cycle of silence.

3.1.4. Social Isolation and Lack of Environmental Support

Social isolation is a control strategy commonly used by domestic violence perpetrators. Various field studies show that perpetrators often limit the victim's interaction with the outside world, including family and friends. This isolation leaves victims with a loss of sources of support that can encourage them to report. In some cases, social media such as neighbors or community leaders are aware of the violence, but cultural pressures make them choose not to engage directly (Sari & Putri, 2020).

Another study found that victims who lived in communities that emphasized the value of family harmony were more likely to be pressured to reconcile than to report. The approach to family settlement or mediation is often given as the first piece of advice, even by the authorities. The pressure to maintain family honor makes victims feel that reporting is too extreme (Lasmini & Marweny, 2025). Thus, social isolation does not only come from the perpetrator, but is also reinforced by an environment that minimizes violence and prioritizes family stability over the safety of the victim.

3.1.5. Normalization of Violence and the Construction of Patriarchal Culture

Many recent studies show that victims' knowledge of legal rights and domestic violence reporting mechanisms is still very limited. For example, research in Bengkulu Province (No et al., 2024). It found that socialization of women's protection laws rarely reaches local communities, so that women victims often do not know that they have the right to report or seek legal assistance (Wahyuni & Lestatika, 2024). As a result, reporting is difficult not because victims refuse justice, but because they don't even realize that the legal avenues are open to them.

In addition, access to assistance services — such as shelters, psychological counseling, legal advocacy — has proven to be very uneven, particularly in suburban or out-of-urban areas. A 2025 article on "case reports" in Indonesia shows that many victims are unable to access health services or advocacy to obtain evidence (visum, witnesses) or emergency protection, so they judge reporting as futile (Auliyah et al., 2025). This condition makes reporting a less realistic option practically.

Furthermore, low legal literacy also makes victims tend to underestimate the future of their case doubting that the law will give a fair or safe outcome. In this context, the literature suggests that the lack of clarity of reporting flows, complicated administrative requirements, and the lack of post-reporting assistance reinforce skepticism towards the formal legal system (Saragi, 2025) Thus, literacy and access are not just an issue of information, but part of the structural barriers that make it difficult for victims to access justice

3.1.6. Distrust of Law Enforcement Officers

One of the elements most often cited in contemporary research as the cause of under-reporting is distrust of law enforcement officials. Recent juridical studies show that although regulations (e.g. Law 23/2004) are available, their implementation is often weak — the investigation process is slow, the authorities are less gender-sensitive, and victims report that they do not feel safe or protected (Saragi, 2025). When victims hear that reports can be closed through mediation, or that the perpetrator can get away with evidence, trust in the legal system deteriorates.

Research in South Sumatra corroborates this argument: many victims withdraw their reports after feeling that the process is long and uncertain, or after pressure from perpetrators and families. The study confirms that mediation or informal settlement is often offered as the main option, although doing so tends to delegitimize the victim's right to justice M Noor Farchan and Dian Alan, "Juridical Analysis of Domestic Violence Crimes Resulting in Death," 2023, 111–16.. This approach signals that formal law is not strictly enforced, so reporting is often considered futile or even dangerous.

Furthermore, comparative analysis shows that when legal institutions fail to maintain the safety and justice of victims, for example by not guaranteeing witness protection or emergency protection, victims are reluctant to report or choose to retract reports. A juridical study comparing the experiences of victims in different regions of Indonesia found a negative correlation between the perception of legal effectiveness and willingness to report — that is, the lower the trust in the authorities, the higher the tendency to remain silent.

3.2. Law Enforcement Challenges and Domestic Violence Cases

3.2.1. The gap between law in books and law in action and mediation practices

Although Law No. 23/2004 provides a broad legal basis for the handling of domestic violence, the evidence of literature studies shows gaps in implementation in the field. In practice, the authorities often prioritize informal settlements or family mediation—something that, according to juridical reviews and empirical studies, can ignore the victim protection framework and reinforce power inequality. The legal implication: progressively written norms are degraded by a legal culture that is tolerant of private settlements, so that legal protection for victims is not fully realized (Farchan & Alan, 2023).

3.2.2. Obstacles to Proof and Delinquency of Complaints: Procedural Burden on Victims

In the judicial realm, domestic violence cases are often hampered by evidentiary standards that still rely heavily on physical evidence (*visum*) and witnesses. Because many forms of domestic violence are psychological, economic, or occur in private spaces without witnesses, enforcement patterns that require physical evidence make many reports considered procedurally "weak." In addition, the complaint-delicacy rules that place the initiative on the shoulders of victims—who may be in conditions of economic dependence, threat of retaliation, and trauma—result in high rates of revocation and under-reporting. Procedural reformulation (acknowledging non-physical evidence, strengthening third-party referrals, and guaranteeing initial protection) is needed to make the legal system more victim-friendly (Fauziah & Rohmatullah, 2024; Utami & MPI, 2021).

3. Conclusion

This literature study-based study shows that the low reporting of domestic violence by women in Indonesia cannot be understood solely as an individual choice of the victim, but rather as a consequence of various interlocking structural, cultural, and legal barriers. The gap between legal norms and enforcement practices (law in books and law in action), evidentiary procedures that burden victims, and the still strong approach to mediation and privatization of domestic conflicts have weakened the function of law as an instrument of protection. In this context, the law has not been fully present as a safe, equitable, and responsive mechanism to experiences of gender-based violence, thereby lowering victims' confidence to report and defend the legal process.

Not limited to individuals, the low reporting of domestic violence reflects the problem of legal culture and institutional capacity that is not yet gender-sensitive. The limitations of apparatus training, the lack of integrated assistance services, and the risk of secondary victimization during the legal process strengthen the vulnerable position of victims. Therefore, efforts to increase domestic violence reporting are not enough to be done through strengthening regulations alone, but demanding implementing reforms that include simplifying evidentiary procedures, strengthening initial protection for victims, and transforming the legal culture of law enforcement officials. The sociology approach of law is crucial to ensure that the law is not only normative, but actually works to protect women victims of domestic violence.

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