



Relational Trauma and Distrust: The Impact of Violence and Infidelity on Women's Readiness for Marriage

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Abstrak

Kekerasan dalam rumah tangga dan perselingkuhan merupakan faktor krusial yang memengaruhi kesejahteraan psikologis perempuan, kepercayaan interpersonal, serta kesiapan mereka membangun hubungan jangka panjang, termasuk pernikahan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi bagaimana pengalaman sebagai saksi atau korban peristiwa tersebut membentuk persepsi perempuan tentang kepercayaan, relasi interpersonal, dan kesiapan menikah. Menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur terhadap sepuluh perempuan berusia 18–28 tahun yang pernah mengalami atau menyaksikan KDRT dan perselingkuhan dalam keluarga. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman tersebut memicu ketidakpercayaan yang mendalam, rasa takut terhadap hubungan romantis, dan pandangan negatif terhadap institusi pernikahan. Informan juga mengalami kesulitan menjalin relasi yang sehat serta menunjukkan gejala ketidakstabilan emosional dan kecemasan. Pola pikir yang terbentuk dari pengalaman traumatis cenderung mendorong penghindaran terhadap pernikahan atau terjebak dalam relasi yang tidak sehat. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya intervensi psikososial untuk mendukung pemulihan dan ketahanan relasional perempuan.

Abstract

Domestic violence and infidelity are critical factors influencing women's psychological well-being, interpersonal trust, and readiness for long-term relationships, including marriage. This study explores how experiences of witnessing or being victimized by such events shape women's perceptions of trust, relationships, and marital readiness. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten women aged 18–28 who had experienced or witnessed domestic violence and infidelity within their families. The findings reveal that these experiences often lead to deep-seated trust issues, fear of romantic relationships, and negative perceptions of marriage. Participants reported difficulties forming healthy interpersonal bonds and displayed symptoms of emotional instability and anxiety. Traumatic pasts were also found to influence cognitive patterns, leading to either avoidance of marriage or repeated entry into unhealthy relationships. These findings highlight the urgent need for psychosocial interventions to mitigate long-term impacts and support women in rebuilding trust and relational resilience.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women are often perceived as beings of beauty, gentleness, humility, and nurturing care. They are generally considered physically weaker, necessitating the presence of a stronger figure for support and protection. Marriage is the union of two individuals of different genders through a legal and religious bond. It is not merely a means of procreation or sexual satisfaction but is expected to create happiness, love, and intimacy, supported by both families to ensure marital satisfaction (Matondang et al., 2024).

Women are often stereotyped as emotional, passive, easily influenced, physically weak, and possessing low sexual drive. In contrast, men are perceived as rational, logical, independent, aggressive, competitive, adventurous, and physically strong with high sexual drive. Contemporary psychological studies suggest that personality differences between men and women are more influenced by parental expectations and socialization than physiological factors (Muamar, 2019).

Marriage is defined as the civil status of a man and a woman who unite under the law of life, granting each other freedom and a legally binding commitment to their relationship based on gender differences. It is also defined as a social agreement between two individuals who legally, economically, and emotionally unite their lives. The meaning of marriage is closely tied to its purpose, as marriage loses its significance if the couple fails to achieve their intended goals within the relationship (Fikriya et al., 2023). Marriage is not merely the legalization of cohabitation between a man and a woman; rather, it is a profound bond that encompasses both physical and spiritual aspects in building a family life. In a marital relationship, both individuals are expected to fulfill their needs and grow together. Marriage is meant to be enduring and aims to bring happiness to the individuals involved (Nurmala, 2021).

Ideally, marriage should provide a sense of comfort, protection, love, belonging, and attention, allowing both partners to escape the feelings of loneliness and alienation they experienced before marriage. Additionally, marriage is expected to fulfill the deepest human needs. However, in reality, not all married couples are able to achieve the initial goals outlined in marriage laws. This is often due to acts of violence occurring within the household, committed by either the husband or the wife against their partner (Huda et al., 2023). Recent statistics reveal that domestic violence (DV) is prevalent not only between spouses but also among children, parents, household workers, and other individuals within the family setting. In many countries, the term "domestic violence" is used synonymously with violence against women. Domestic violence refers to acts of aggression or violence that occur within significant interpersonal relationships (Sulthoni et al., 2024).

Domestic violence includes psychological, physical, and sexual aggression between intimate partners. It can occur between husbands and wives, dating couples, parents and children, adult children and their elderly parents, or even among siblings. According to Hasbianto, domestic violence is a form of physical and emotional/psychological abuse used as a means of control within a household relationship (Ufran et al., 2022). Thus, various terms have emerged in society, such as "violence against women," "gender-based violence," and "domestic violence," all of which predominantly affect women.

Literature reviews indicate that domestic violence is more frequently perpetrated by men against women. According to Law No. 23 of 2004 on the Elimination of Domestic Violence in Indonesia, a victim is anyone who experiences violence and/or threats of violence within the household (Dewi et al, 2019). However, not all families fit the ideal image of a harmonious household. In general, factors contributing to domestic violence include gender role stereotypes, racial and cultural influences, and economic conditions. In 2023, Indonesia recorded 259,150 cases of violence against women, with 245,548 cases handled by 358 religious courts and 13,602 cases managed by 233 service organizations across 34 provinces (Nurmaliza et al., 2023).

Children exposed to domestic violence are also at risk of abuse. Studies on wife abuse reveal that nearly 25% of their children also suffer physical abuse, while half experience verbal abuse even when in the same room (Yosep et al., 2022). Children living in families affected by domestic violence face a high risk of neglect, direct abuse, and the loss of parental role models. Witnessing, hearing, or experiencing domestic violence within the household can have numerous negative effects on a child's safety, stability, and overall well-being (Bolangitan, 2024). These children become indirect victims, also known as latent victims.

According to psychologists, there are several psychological effects on children who become victims of domestic violence. Specifically, such children may experience developmental regression, losing their courage, refusing to sleep alone without accompaniment, bedwetting, and other signs of emotional distress. They may also show delayed language development and struggle to express their thoughts to others. Additionally, these children often suffer from anxiety, excessive worry, and intense fear, frequently reliving the violence they witnessed, such as their father abusing their mother (Praptini et al., 2024). When a child becomes a victim of domestic violence or witnesses abuse between their parents, it significantly impacts their development. Children who witness domestic violence must be taken seriously, meaning they require specialized intervention from professionals such as psychologists (Sinaga, 2022). The goal of this intervention is to ensure that the child's experiences and exposure to violence do not result in deep psychological trauma that could affect their well-being in the long term.

Children who witness domestic violence tend to develop a distorted understanding of violence, perceiving it as a normal way to resolve conflicts. A 2011 longitudinal study by Emery suggests that exposure to domestic violence results in psychological trauma and deteriorating mental health as children grow older. This decline in attitudes and behaviors toward their surroundings is often linked to childhood exposure to violence (Siahaan et al., 2024). Many children who witness domestic violence are also victims of physical abuse. Studies indicate that approximately 70% of men who abuse their female partners also harm their children. Additionally, women who experience domestic abuse are more likely to neglect or harm their own children. Consequently, children who witness or experience domestic violence face long-term physical and mental health risks (Ginting et al., 2022).

It is crucial to recognize that harmony and security play essential roles in human life, particularly within marriage. In recent years, cases of domestic violence and mistreatment of

women both physical and psychological have increased, as widely reported in print and electronic media.

This research aims to explore and analyze domestic violence as a form of abuse that causes physical, psychological, and sexual suffering in women, ultimately affecting their readiness for marriage. The study seeks to understand how domestic violence impacts victims most of whom are women and their ability to commit to a long-term relationship such as marriage.

The gap between societal expectations and the reality of family life creates an imbalance that can have both psychological and physical consequences for individuals who experience hardship within their households. Domestic violence, particularly against women, leaves victims vulnerable to long-term effects that influence their perception of the future especially their readiness for marriage and family life.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of women who have witnessed or been victims of domestic violence (DV) and infidelity, as well as the impact of these experiences on their perceptions of interpersonal relationships. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals assign meaning to their traumatic experiences. By examining the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of their experiences, this study aims to identify how domestic violence and infidelity influence the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, coping mechanisms, and an individual's self-concept in the future.

The study's informants consist of 10 women aged 18–28, divided into two groups: five individuals who have witnessed or been victims of infidelity within their families and five individuals who have witnessed or been victims of domestic violence. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of subjective narratives. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in their experiences and systematically interpret their underlying meanings. Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute academically to the understanding of the psychosocial impacts of domestic violence and infidelity, particularly on individuals in early adulthood.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Gender and patriarchy create unequal power relations, where men are regarded as superior to women. This results in the perception that a husband holds authority over his household, including his wife and children. The belief that a wife is the property of her husband and that a husband has greater control over the family reinforces gender-based inequality (Halizah et al., 2023). The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines violence against women as any act based on gender differences that causes or may cause physical, sexual, or psychological suffering. This includes threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of freedom, whether in public or private life (Mardiah, 2021).

3.1. The Impact of Domestic Violence and Infidelity on Women's Trust in Marriage

Marriage is considered a social expectation in adulthood. However, marriage remains a personal choice for each individual. While many anticipate marriage as a significant life event, the situation is different for those who have witnessed or experienced domestic violence. Individuals who have been exposed to violence within their parents' marriage often develop trauma that affects their perception of relationships (Pertiwi et al., 2024). Given the importance of marriage and the numerous factors that must be considered before entering into it, a certain level of readiness is required before making the decision to marry. Marital readiness is essential for building a stable and fulfilling family life.

Before entering marriage, an individual needs to be ready to build a happy union. Marital readiness is essential for successfully navigating the developmental tasks of adulthood. According to the Complete Dictionary of Psychology, readiness refers to a state of preparedness to react or respond to something, representing a stage of maturity or development. Marital readiness involves knowledge, perception, exposure to information, and external factors. It means an individual is prepared and equipped to undertake the responsibilities of marriage. Marital readiness includes the ability to form relationships and commitments, accept responsibilities as a spouse, engage in emotional and sexual intimacy, and manage family life and parenting (Najah et al., 2021). Marital readiness consists of two aspects: Personal Marital Readiness and Situational Marital Readiness (Nahda et al., 2024).

1. Personal Marital Readiness

a. Emotional Maturity

The concept of emotional maturity involves self-awareness and identifying one's own feelings. Emotional maturity is developed through experience and the ability to adapt to change and challenges. This experience helps individuals become aware of their own emotions and learn how to respond to life's situations. Emotionally mature individuals can form and maintain personal relationships, understand others' feelings (empathy), give and receive love, and make long-term commitments. In contrast, emotionally immature individuals focus only on their own desires and struggle with commitment. A marriage where both partners have emotional maturity and realistic expectations is easier to maintain.

b. Age Readiness

Age readiness refers to the appropriate age for marriage. Emotional maturity takes time to develop, meaning that age is closely linked to marital readiness. The age at which an individual plans to marry influences their perception and preparation for marriage. Those who want to marry at a younger age are more likely to prepare for marriage earlier.

c. Emotional Health

Emotional problems such as anxiety, discomfort, and distrust are signs of emotional immaturity. Possessiveness, irresponsibility, and unpredictability can make it difficult to maintain a healthy marriage. Even if an individual can give love, they may struggle to receive love from others due to deep-seated fears and insecurities.

d. Role Model Readiness

Marriage must be approached with an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of spouses. Parents who set a good example as husband and wife can positively influence their children's marital readiness.

2. Situational Marital Readiness

a. Financial Readiness

Financial readiness depends on the values of each individual or couple. According to Cutright, individuals with higher incomes are more likely to marry.

b. Time Readiness

Proper planning and preparation are needed before marriage. Both partners should have the time and readiness to enter into marriage.

The phenomenon of domestic violence (DV) cannot be ignored, as it has led to anxiety and fear among women about marriage. This fear arises from the concern that they may experience violence from their future partners. Being a victim of domestic violence can leave deep physical and psychological wounds, affecting one's view of relationships, including marriage (Barus et al., 2024). Trust is a complex phenomenon that influences human behavior in relationships. From a psychological perspective, trust is first formed through interactions with reliable individuals. However, trust in specific people is more fragile than general trust, as it is based on personal experiences and reciprocity. Similarly, institutional trust depends on public perception and may change over time. Experiencing trauma can erode an individual's trust in others (Wu et al., 2022).

Betrayal trauma is a complex emotional experience that strikes at the core of a person's trust and sense of security, leaving deep scars that take a long time to heal. This type of trauma occurs when a close individual usually a trusted partner or caregiver violates the bond of trust through deceit, dishonesty, or infidelity. The emotional impact of betrayal trauma varies, with its effects resonating across multiple aspects of a person's life. Victims of domestic violence may struggle to build intimate and trusting relationships due to the emotional trauma they have endured. Domestic violence can also have intergenerational effects, meaning that trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next (Gojali et al., 2022). Children who witness or experience violence against their parents or caregivers may develop PTSD symptoms later in life as they attempt to cope with the trauma they have experienced (Zahra et al., 2023). Silvia, who witnessed domestic violence between her parents, shared:

"Seeing infidelity and domestic violence at home made it really hard for me to trust others, especially men. I constantly fear that the same thing will happen again." (Interview, 1 September 2024).

Karina, who witnessed her father abusing her mother, said:

"This experience made it extremely difficult for me to trust people. I always suspect that people can change at any moment and might have bad intentions. Even in friendships, I often doubt people's sincerity." (Interview, 1 September 2024).

Melanie, who saw both of her parents being unfaithful, explained:

"I find it hard to trust others and often feel suspicious of people who are kind to me. I struggle to distinguish between those who genuinely care and those with hidden agendas. I've become more closed off and find it difficult to open up to others." (Interview, 2 September 2024).

Trauma caused by domestic violence often triggers depression and anxiety. Depression is a mental health disorder characterized by intense sadness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, weight changes, sleep disturbances, and suicidal thoughts. Meanwhile, anxiety disorders involve excessive worry or fear without a clear cause (Ariska et al., 2025). Victims of domestic violence frequently experience chronic depression and anxiety due to ongoing physical or emotional threats from their partners or other family members. Many victims develop depression as a result of prolonged abuse in the household. These poor emotional conditions can reduce a person's desire to engage in long-term relationships (Putri et al., 2024). Victims of domestic violence are at a higher risk of experiencing depression that affects their mood, behavior, and cognitive abilities. The longer the violence continues, the greater the risk of mental health decline.

Victims of domestic violence may also suffer from anxiety disorders. They can experience sudden fear or panic attacks, triggered by memories of past violence or sometimes without any clear reason. Children who witness or experience emotional, physical, or sexual abuse are also at a higher risk of developing mental health disorders in adulthood, including depression and anxiety (Sinaga, 2022). Karina expressed her feelings of distress and trauma as a result of the violence committed by her father,

"Watching domestic violence between my parents was terrifying and traumatic. I often felt like my world was falling apart. I still remember the shouting and chaos at home, the overwhelming fear of seeing my mother being hurt. I felt helpless and wanted to protect my mother, but I was also very afraid of my father." (Interview, 1 September 2024).

Deep sadness and trauma were also experienced by Ella, a 20-year-old woman whose parents are in the process of divorcing due to domestic violence,

"The domestic violence my father committed has made me extremely disappointed in him. A father is supposed to be a daughter's first love, but instead, he became the deepest wound in his daughter's life. Disappointed, sad, traumatized." (Interview, 2 September 2024).

Lately, the marriage rate in Indonesia has been declining. According to data from Indonesia's Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), the number of marriages in Indonesia decreased by 7.51% in 2023 (Annur, 2024). The rise in domestic violence (DV) cases is strongly suspected to be one of the reasons for this decline. Domestic violence creates deep trauma among young generations, especially Generation Z. The endless cycle of violence and the increasing number of cases each year have caused significant mental and physical distress for young people, particularly women. The fear of domestic violence, conflict, disappointment, and the shame associated with it has contributed to a negative perception of marriage, leading many

to view it as an institution filled with conflict and abuse rather than love and stability (Sultoni et al., 2024). Ayana, a 27-year-old woman whose father was a perpetrator of domestic violence, shared:

“I have trust issues when it comes to marriage. Because of the painful experiences from my parents' relationship, I am extremely cautious in making friends. When it comes to relationships with men, I don't want to get too close or even date. If I ever consider marriage, I know it will be a very selective and complicated process because there are so many things to consider before taking that step.” (Interview, 1 September 2024).

Haura, a 22-year-old woman whose father was unfaithful, expressed her negative view on marriage:

“I am very afraid of marriage. Out of all the couples, how many are truly happy? How many stay together just for the sake of their children? How many end up divorcing? Even on social media, I see the same pattern. I believe happiness can be achieved alone, just like single mothers or fathers who choose not to remarry but still find joy in life.” (Interview, 1 September 2024)

Silvia reinforced this perspective, saying:

“My view on marriage or long-term relationships is more skeptical now. I don't want to rush into marriage or even think about long-term relationships because I feel that marriage is unpredictable and full of risks.” (Interview, 1 September 2024).

Isabelle, who has trauma from her mother's infidelity, also shared:

“My perspective on marriage has completely changed. I am scared to even start thinking about marriage because I fear it will end up just like my parents' full of conflict and ending in divorce.” (Interview, 2 September 2024).

3.2. The Impact of Domestic Violence and Infidelity on Women's Concerns

Teenagers who witness violence often exhibit negative behaviors, such as arguing with family members or skipping school. They may also engage in risky behaviors, including casual sex, alcohol consumption, or drug use. Many of them struggle with low self-esteem and have difficulties forming friendships. Some may resort to fighting, bullying others, or even facing legal issues. These behaviors are more commonly observed in boys who experienced violence as children than in girls. In contrast, teenage girls are more likely to withdraw and suffer from depression (Ausrianti et al., 2022). Understanding the factors that influence child development and childhood trauma can serve as a reference for identifying cases of violence in intimate relationships during adulthood. This understanding is also essential for developing interventions for perpetrators, direct victims, and indirect victims of domestic violence (Prastini, 2024).

Children who experience violence usually endure it from a young age, which shapes their mindset as victims deeply embedded in their subconscious. As a result, they may internalize the belief that they are only meant to be sacrificed. If this pattern of thinking persists, the child may become trapped in a lifelong cycle of victimization, unable to break free (WHO, 2025).

The consequences of domestic violence extend beyond simply being a victim. A child who has suffered from abuse may later become a perpetrator of violence. Research shows that bullying behavior is often carried out by individuals who were once victims of bullying themselves, and the likelihood of this occurring is significantly high. Children who witness or experience domestic violence are at risk of perpetuating the cycle of abuse as adults, either as abusers or as victims of domestic violence. For instance, a boy who sees his mother being abused by his father is ten times more likely to commit violence against his female partner when he grows up. Similarly, a girl raised in a household where her father abused her mother is six times more likely to experience sexual violence compared to girls from non-violent homes (Philips, 2021).

Low self-esteem in children is often caused by their fear of making mistakes, which could result in further violence. This fear can hinder a child's development, making it difficult for them to take initiative in solving problems or to build social connections. The emotional wounds and trauma caused by domestic violence can have long-lasting effects on a child's life, potentially leading to depression, stress, and other psychological disorders that disrupt social functioning and daily activities (D et al., 2018). Children who experience violence may develop an intense fear of any form of aggression, even minor instances such as loud noises, raised voices, or sudden movements. They may also feel a deep sense of loss, as they no longer have a reliable adult figure to protect them. Over time, this leads to a growing distrust of others, making it increasingly difficult for them to place their faith in people. These children tend to withdraw from interpersonal relationships and develop a profound fear of forming bonds with the opposite sex. They may come to believe that no one is truly capable of providing them with security, reinforcing the idea that no one is worthy of their trust (Krauss et al., 2020).

One of the most common long-term effects of domestic violence is the fear of experiencing similar abuse in future relationships. Traumatic experiences can make it difficult for survivors to believe in the possibility of safe and healthy relationships (Syamil et al., 2025). Relational trauma refers to traumatic experiences caused by individuals with whom one has a close bond. This trauma is not limited to romantic relationships but also extends to friendships and family relationships. It arises when a partner, family member, or friend causes harm through emotional, verbal, or physical abuse. It is important to note that physical abuse is not the only form of abuse that can cause lasting trauma; verbal and emotional abuse can be just as damaging, especially during formative years (Dye, 2020). Experiencing relational trauma at a young age can severely disrupt a person's well-being and ability to form new relationships. This trauma may lead to emotional instability, trust issues, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other mental health disorders.

Mumtazah, who has suffered from the effects of her father's infidelity and domestic violence, affirms this:

"I'm scared that my past trauma will have a negative impact on my future relationships." (Interview, 2 September 2024).

Similarly, Devina, who was traumatized by domestic violence and her parents' infidelity, expresses her concerns:

"I'm afraid I will experience the same kind of abuse and won't be able to choose the right partner." (Interview, 30 August 2024),

Domestic violence often damages a person's ability to establish healthy intimacy. Survivors may struggle to open up and become emotionally vulnerable with others (Jannah et al., 2024). This can lead to a loss of trust in people and a fear of intimacy, making it difficult to build new, healthy relationships. Childhood trauma can make it challenging to be emotionally vulnerable with a romantic partner or close friends. Moreover, relational trauma affects self-worth, causing many domestic violence survivors to feel unworthy of love or a healthy relationship. These feelings of unworthiness make it difficult to form new attachments and can lead to self-destructive behaviors (Lippard et al., 2020). Isabelle, another survivor, shares her fears:

"I'm afraid of becoming like my mother, and I'm scared I won't be able to choose a trustworthy partner who truly loves me instead of hurting me." (Interview, 2 September 2024).

Mumtazah, who witnessed her father abusing her mother, also expresses her apprehensions about relationships:

"I'm afraid of meeting a man as abusive as my father. I find it hard to trust men, and I don't think I will ever be able to consider marriage. My perception of marriage is negative I believe it only brings suffering, just like what my mother endured. I don't want to end up like her." (Interview, 2 September 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

Domestic violence is any act that results in physical, sexual, psychological suffering, or neglect within a household. It constitutes a violation of human rights and a crime against human dignity. Domestic violence and infidelity significantly damage women's trust in relationships, cause emotional trauma, and affect their readiness for marriage. Domestic violence impacts not only physical well-being but also psychological stability, instilling fear, distrust, and insecurity in relationships. Meanwhile, infidelity undermines faith in commitment and fidelity, ultimately affecting the ability to build healthy relationships in the future. These negative experiences often lead to trust issues, making it difficult for women to trust partners, avoid toxic relationships, and commit to long-term unions. Thus, marriage readiness depends not only on financial security but also on mental and emotional preparedness. Healthy communication and awareness of relationship red flags are essential for establishing harmonious marriages. Addressing domestic violence and infidelity effectively requires support from families, communities, and governments. Many victims lack the courage and resources to escape abusive situations, necessitating legal protection and appropriate interventions. Domestic violence and infidelity are not just private issues but violations of human rights that demand serious recognition and legal action.

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