



Social Change and Domestic Violence: Empirical Reflections on Islamic Family Law in Pekanbaru

Muhammad Ismail, Rusli Zainal, Misra Netti, Robuthah Alam Hadi Faisal, Irma Romianto
Institut Agama Islam Lukma Eddy
Pekanbaru, Indonesia

*Correspondence Address: muhamadismail2014@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between social change and domestic violence within the framework of Islamic family law in Pekanbaru, Indonesia. Using a qualitative thematic approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 12 purposively selected respondents, including domestic violence survivors, religious leaders, legal practitioners, and community mediators. The findings reveal that ongoing social transformations—such as shifting gender roles, economic stress, and the weakening of traditional family structures—contribute significantly to the complexity and prevalence of domestic violence cases. Respondents demonstrated varied understandings of Islamic family law, often influenced by cultural norms rather than textual Islamic doctrines. Thematic analysis identified three core themes: (1) dissonance between religious ideals and lived social realities, (2) limited legal literacy regarding Islamic marital obligations, and (3) tensions between local customary practices (adat) and formal Islamic legal frameworks. The study concludes that while Islamic family law offers normative guidance for a harmonious domestic life, its implementation faces socio-cultural and institutional obstacles. Enhancing community-based legal literacy and integrating Islamic legal principles into local dispute resolution mechanisms are recommended to address domestic violence more effectively amidst ongoing social change.

Key Words: Domestic violence, Islamic law, Gender, Justice, Social change

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Introduction

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, has witnessed profound social transformations over the past two decades. Rapid urbanization, the widespread penetration of digital technologies, shifts in educational and economic opportunities, and the growing visibility of global gender discourse have all contributed to reconfiguring family structures and gender roles. These societal shifts unfold within the broader framework of Islamic legal traditions that remain influential in regulating personal and familial matters. In this context, Islamic family law, codified through the *Kompilasi Hukum Islam* (KHI), functions as a legal and moral compass for many Indonesians, especially in marriage, divorce, and domestic responsibilities. However, the interplay between modern social dynamics and classical legal norms often produces tensions, particularly in domestic violence cases (*Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga*, KDRT).

Domestic violence remains a pressing and pervasive issue in Indonesia. According to Komnas Perempuan, approximately 406,000 cases of violence against women were reported in 2019—marking a 14% increase from the previous year—with intimate partner violence comprising the majority of these incidents. While national data offers a grim snapshot, local-level studies underscore the regional nuances of this problem. In Pekanbaru, for example, a 2017 forensic clinic study reported a 10.9% prevalence of domestic violence, with women being the most affected. These statistics hint at a deeper, systemic issue shaped not only by individual behavior but also by cultural norms, religious interpretations, and institutional responses.

Legally, the Indonesian state has enacted Law No. 23 of 2004 on the Elimination of Domestic Violence (UU PKDRT), which, along with the KHI, provides a formal legal basis to address domestic violence. However, the enforcement of these laws remains inconsistent. Many survivors are reluctant or unable to access formal legal mechanisms due to a combination of low legal literacy, stigma, economic dependency, and prevailing cultural pressures. As a result, numerous cases are diverted to informal dispute resolution channels, often mediated by religious or traditional (*adat*) leaders, whose understanding of legal frameworks and gender-sensitive practices may be limited.

Scholars such as Amin and Hashmi (2024), have documented the integration of Islamic principles into national domestic violence legislation, signaling a normative convergence between Sharia-based values and human rights frameworks. However, most of these analyses remain theoretical or policy-oriented, lacking grounded, empirical insight into how such legal integration plays out in daily life—especially in contexts where customary and religious norms intersect and sometimes conflict. In Central Java, Sukendar et al. (2023) found that many victims bypass the formal judicial system due to socioeconomic constraints and instead turn to religious court mediators, who often lack professional legal training. This has raised concerns over due process, impartiality, and the effectiveness of institutional safeguards.

In Bandung, research by Kania et al. (2024) demonstrated the potential of Islamic mediation in resolving domestic violence cases. However, the absence of standardized procedural guidelines and the inconsistent application of Islamic reconciliation principles have undermined the reliability of such mechanisms. Similarly, in Tanah Datar, West Sumatra, local police and religious leaders often default to *adat*-based solutions or spiritual interventions—such as invoking parental blessings or religious reminders—without adequately addressing the legal or psychological needs of victims.

Significant geographic and thematic gaps remain despite the value of these regional studies. In particular, little is known about how the province of Riau—especially its capital, Pekanbaru—navigates domestic violence within the contours of Islamic family law amid rapid socio-cultural transformation. Although forensic data from Pekanbaru provides quantitative evidence of domestic violence prevalence, there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring how survivors interpret their experiences, seek redress, and engage with both formal and informal resolution pathways.

Moreover, the national discourse on gender and Islam is undergoing subtle but significant shifts. Progressive Islamic movements, such as those represented by the Women's Ulema Congress (KUPI), advocate for more gender-equitable interpretations of Islamic texts and law. However, empirical investigations into the influence of these reformist voices at the grassroots level—especially in conservative or semi-urban communities like Pekanbaru—remain scarce. Relatedly, there is a limited exploration of how victims employ religious or spiritual coping mechanisms in navigating abuse. In Lombok, for instance, women have been found to cultivate "hidden agency"



through practices such as dhikr (Sufi chanting) and Qur'anic recitation, which enable them to resist or reinterpret their circumstances within a religiously acceptable framework.

To address these multidimensional gaps, the present study conducts a thematic qualitative inquiry into domestic violence survivors' experiences and key actors' responses in Pekanbaru. Drawing on interviews with 12 purposively selected informants—including survivors, religious authorities, legal practitioners, and community mediators—the study investigates how social change affects the lived realities of domestic violence and its resolution under Islamic family law. This research illuminates regionally specific patterns and institutional dynamics by contextualizing local findings within broader comparisons to Central Java, Bandung, and West Sumatra.

Ultimately, this study aims to enrich academic understanding of the intersection between Islamic legal practice and domestic violence in contemporary Indonesia. It contributes empirically grounded insights into how religious, cultural, and legal narratives coalesce in community-level dispute resolution. Furthermore, it seeks to inform policy and advocacy efforts by identifying culturally attuned strategies for strengthening legal literacy, improving institutional responsiveness, and empowering survivors within faith-informed justice frameworks.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to explore how social change influences experiences of domestic violence and its resolution within the framework of Islamic family law in Pekanbaru, Riau Province. A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to uncover the depth and complexity of social experiences and to interpret participants' perspectives within their cultural and religious contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was adopted as the principal analytic strategy, offering a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring patterns and themes in the data.

Research Site and Participant Selection

Pekanbaru was selected as the research site due to its urbanizing character and the relative lack of empirical research on domestic violence and Islamic legal practices outside Java. The region has experienced significant socio-cultural changes, making it a relevant context for examining the dynamic interactions between gender roles, legal frameworks, and Islamic traditions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insight. A total of 12 informants were involved in the study, consisting of four survivors of domestic violence, three religious figures (including ustadz and penghulu), two legal professionals affiliated with the religious court system, two community-based mediators, and one representative of a local women's rights advocacy group. This diverse composition allowed for triangulation of perspectives from formal legal actors, informal mediators, and survivors themselves. Snowball sampling was also used to identify survivors who may not have reported their cases through formal institutions, ensuring the inclusion of voices often overlooked in official data (Noy, 2008).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews between January and March 2025. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa, Indonesia, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Open-ended questions guided the discussions to explore themes such as participants' understanding of domestic violence, their experiences with legal and religious mediation, the influence of Islamic teachings, and the impact of socio-cultural change on family dynamics. All interviews were with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were later translated into English for analysis. All participants were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. NVivo 12 software was used to assist in data organization and coding. Coding was conducted both inductively—from emergent patterns

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in the data—and deductively, based on existing frameworks of legal pluralism, gender justice in Islam, and informal dispute resolution (Merry, 2006; Hidayatullah, 2014). Key themes that emerged from the data included: "Negotiating Faith and Fear," reflecting how survivors reconcile religious teachings with their experiences of violence; "Legal Illiteracy and Institutional Distance," pointing to barriers in accessing formal justice; "Adat vs. Sharia," highlighting the tensions between customary and religious practices in mediation; "Spiritual Coping and Hidden Agency," revealing survivors' use of religious rituals to endure or resist abuse; and "The Role of Religious Leaders," examining the influence of clerical interpretations in shaping social norms.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, this study followed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Strategies to support these standards included prolonged engagement with the field, peer debriefing, member checking with selected participants, and maintaining a research journal to track reflexivity and personal bias. These methods were essential to maintain ethical and methodological rigor, especially given the sensitivity of the topic and the religious-cultural context in which the study was situated.

Table 1. Thematic

No	Theme	Description
1	Negotiating Faith and Fear	Survivors experience internal conflict between religious teachings that emphasize marital obedience and their lived experiences of violence. Religious values often serve both as a constraint and a source of strength.
2	Legal Illiteracy and Institutional Distance	A general lack of awareness about domestic violence laws and religious court procedures leads to low reporting and limited legal engagement. Formal systems are perceived as distant, inaccessible, or culturally unfamiliar.
3	Adat vs. Sharia: Navigating Plural Legal Cultures	Domestic violence cases are frequently resolved through adat-based mechanisms that emphasize reconciliation over accountability. Religious and customary norms are often blended into informal mediation practices.
4	Spiritual Coping and Hidden Agency	Survivors draw on religious rituals and personal spirituality to manage trauma and maintain resilience. These coping mechanisms can foster subtle forms of agency and emotional independence.
5	Role of Religious Authorities in Shaping Gender Norms	Religious leaders influence how domestic violence is interpreted and addressed within communities. Interpretations vary, with some promoting traditional patriarchal norms and others advocating gender-equitable teachings.

Result and Discussion

This study investigated how survivors, religious leaders, legal practitioners, and community mediators in Pekanbaru navigate the intersection of social change, domestic violence, and Islamic family law. Thematic analysis of twelve in-depth interviews produced five core themes that reflect evolving perceptions, challenges, and practices related to domestic violence resolution in the region.

The first theme, Negotiating Faith and Fear, captures the moral and emotional dilemmas faced by survivors as they attempt to reconcile experiences of domestic violence with religious teachings that emphasize obedience, patience, and family preservation. Several participants described how religious values such as sabar (patience) and ketaatan (obedience to one's husband)



discouraged them from seeking external help, particularly during the early stages of abuse. However, some survivors reported gradually adopting more empowering religious interpretations—particularly after receiving guidance from gender-sensitive religious leaders—which helped shift their perception from endurance to self-preservation.

The second theme, Legal Illiteracy, and Institutional Distance highlights a widespread lack of awareness regarding the 2004 Domestic Violence Law (UU PKDRT) and the formal role of religious courts in addressing such cases. Survivors often perceived legal institutions as remote, bureaucratic, or incompatible with cultural values, resulting in low levels of legal engagement. Legal professionals interviewed noted that survivors' unfamiliarity with formal processes—compounded by logistical, economic, and social barriers—frequently discouraged them from filing complaints or pursuing formal mediation. This theme underscores the disconnect between statutory protections and their practical accessibility at the community level.

The third theme, Adat vs. Sharia: Navigating Plural Legal Cultures, reveals that most domestic violence cases are addressed through informal dispute mechanisms involving family elders, community leaders, or adat-based mediation. These processes prioritize reconciliation, harmony, and family unity, often discouraging separation or divorce, even in cases of chronic abuse. Religious leaders often mediate, blending Islamic principles with local customary values. While these pluralistic approaches can be culturally responsive, they frequently overlook the survivor's safety and legal rights and tend to reinforce patriarchal norms.

The fourth theme, Spiritual Coping and Hidden Agency illustrates how survivors draw upon Islamic spiritual practices—such as dhikr, personal prayer, and Qur'anic reflection—as tools for psychological resilience. Although these practices are not always outwardly confrontational, they offer emotional support and can gradually foster an internal shift toward seeking help or asserting boundaries. This theme reveals a nuanced form of agency within religious frameworks, enabling survivors to reframe their suffering and decision-making processes in ways that align with their faith.

The final theme, The Role of Religious Authorities in Shaping Gender Norms, shows that religious leaders exert significant influence over how domestic violence is interpreted and resolved within local communities. While some clerics reinforced traditional views of male authority and female submission, others—particularly those affiliated with progressive Islamic networks or trained in gender-sensitive interpretation—advocated for more equitable relationships and emphasized the Quranic values of justice ('adl) and compassion (rahmah). The variation in clerical responses reflects ongoing contestation within Islamic discourse in Indonesia. It highlights the potential for religious reform efforts, such as those promoted by the Women's Ulema Congress (KUPI), to influence community-level norms.

Overall, the results demonstrate that domestic violence in Pekanbaru is addressed through a complex interplay of religious belief, cultural expectation, legal knowledge, and institutional capacity. These findings point to both the limitations and opportunities within Islamic family law systems to provide culturally grounded, survivor-centered responses to domestic violence amid broader social transformation.

Table 2. The interviews with twelve informants in Pekanbaru

Code	Role	Ages	Key Insights	Narrative
S1		35	Endured violence due to religious pressure on obedience and patience.	I was told that a wife must be patient and that leaving the household is a bigger sin than staying.
S2	Survivor of domestic violence	34	Struggled with moral guilt; saw obedience as a religious duty.	Disobedience to the husband was seen as disobedience to God.
S3		34	Shifted perspective after guidance from a gender-sensitive religious leader.	When she ustadzah explained that Islam does not condone injustice in the home, I realized I had the right to live safely.

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S4		37	Learned legal rights from a community workshop and chose not to stay silent.	I did not know I could report. Now, I know I will never stay silent again.
R1	Religious leader (Penghulu)		Emphasized marital harmony and patience; reluctant toward divorce.	Marriage is about patience; it is not good to rush to divorce for small things.
R2	Religious leader (Ustadz)		Acknowledged abuse but prioritized reconciliation over formal action.	Sharia encourages peace in the home. Only if peace fails should separation be considered.
R3	Religious leader (Ustadzah)		Promoted justice and anti-violence interpretation of Islam; active in women's education.	Islam upholds justice and does not support violence under any pretext.
L1	Religious court official		Few cases reach court; survivors face social and procedural barriers.	Most women either do not know the process or are too afraid of family backlash.
L2	Family law attorney		Legal literacy remains low; many victims are unaware of their legal rights.	Legal aid exists, but the awareness is nearly zero. People still see the religious court as a last resort, not a right.
M1	Community-based mediator (male)		Mediation focuses on preserving family unity using adat and Islamic values.	We are taught to restore peace, not to break families.
M2	Community-based mediator (female)		Trusted listener; not legally trained; prefers quiet, informal resolution.	I am not trained in law but try to listen and guide them. Sometimes, I refer them to the religious court, but most want the problem resolved quietly.
A1	Women's rights advocate		Advocates progressive Islamic discourse; uses Qur'anic justice narratives in outreach.	Our message is clear: Islam supports justice. We use verses and hadith that center on compassion and equality.

The findings of this study reveal that domestic violence in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, is situated within a complex socio-religious matrix-shaped by evolving interpretations of Islamic family law, customary practices, and ongoing social transformation. Participants' narratives underscore the tension between traditional norms and emerging progressive discourses on gender justice, reflecting broader dynamics across Indonesia's plural legal and religious landscape.

One of the most salient findings is the internal moral conflict experienced by survivors, particularly in reconciling religious obligations with their victimization. As the testimonies of S1 and S2 show, many women interpret sabar (patience) and ketaatan (obedience) as religious imperatives that legitimize their endurance of abuse. This is consistent with Hidayatullah's (2014) critique of patriarchal readings of Qur'anic texts that marginalize women's autonomy and well-being. However, a contrasting narrative emerged in cases such as S3 and S4, where engagement with progressive religious leaders and access to legal information enabled survivors to reinterpret Islamic teachings in a more empowering light. This shift aligns with studies by Rinaldo (2013) and van Doorn-Harder (2006), which suggest that the Islamic faith, when interpreted through a gender-sensitive lens, can serve as a foundation for resistance and self-determination rather than submission.

The study also highlights the persistent gap between legal frameworks and lived realities. Despite the existence of the 2004 Domestic Violence Law (UU PKDRT) and provisions in the Kompilasi Hukum Islam that support women's rights, survivors often lack awareness of these protections. Both legal professionals (L1 and L2) confirmed that survivors rarely access formal justice mechanisms due to social stigma, institutional distance, and procedural complexity. These findings



echo Merry (2006) "legal consciousness" theory, which states that communities may recognize legal norms but perceive them as disconnected from everyday life. As a result, the law's transformative potential remains limited without parallel efforts to build legal literacy and public trust in formal institutions.

Further complicating matters is the coexistence of Islamic and customary (adat) legal norms, as described by the community-based mediators (M1 and M2). Dispute resolution often defaults to informal, community-based mediation that prioritizes family harmony over individual protection. While these pluralistic mechanisms are deeply embedded in local culture, they often dilute the legal safeguards afforded to survivors. This reflects the concerns Bowen (2003) raised about the negotiation between state, Islamic, and customary laws in Indonesia, where informal mediation can obscure legal justice, particularly for women in vulnerable positions.

However, amid these challenges, the research points to promising developments. The role of religious leaders is not static. At the same time, some (e.g., R1 and R2) reinforce traditional norms, while others (e.g., R3) actively promote interpretations of Islam that center on justice, mutual respect, and nonviolence. This dynamic illustrates the fluidity of religious authority and the potential of progressive Islamic voices—such as those represented in the Women's Ulema Congress (KUPI)—to reshape dominant discourses from within the faith tradition (Kloos, 2019).

Spiritual coping strategies also emerged as a form of "hidden agency" among survivors. As demonstrated by S4 and supported by the broader literature (e.g., Rinaldo, 2013), practices such as dhikr, prayer, and Qur'anic reflection provide emotional resilience and moral clarity. These strategies allow survivors to assert agency in subtle yet meaningful ways, particularly in contexts where open resistance may be culturally or socially constrained.

Finally, the findings underscore the critical importance of culturally attuned and religiously grounded interventions. The efforts of A1, a women's rights advocate, to deliver religiously framed messages on gender equality and domestic violence prevention suggest that reform efforts must engage not only with legal instruments but also with religious and cultural narratives. This resonates with the argument by Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy (2010) that effective reform in religious communities must speak from within the language of the tradition, not in opposition to it.

In summary, the discussion reveals that while social and religious norms in Indonesia continue to shape domestic violence responses in patriarchal ways, there is increasing openness to reformist interpretations of Islam that support gender justice. The challenge lies in strengthening the links between law, religious ethics, and community practice to ensure that survivors are protected and empowered in ways that resonate with their faith and cultural context.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that the complex interplay between religious interpretation, cultural expectations, and limited access to legal mechanisms shapes domestic violence in Pekanbaru. Survivors often internalize patriarchal religious teachings that emphasize obedience and patience, which delays help-seeking behavior. However, engagement with gender-sensitive religious figures and exposure to progressive Islamic interpretations have enabled some women to reframe their understanding of faith as a source of justice and protection. Despite formal legal frameworks like UU KDRT and the Kompilasi Hukum Islam, many cases are still resolved through informal, adat-based mechanisms prioritizing reconciliation over accountability, reflecting the persistent gap between law and lived experience.

The findings also highlight the transformative potential of progressive religious discourse and spiritual coping strategies. Religious leaders play a dual role: while some uphold conservative views, others actively advocate for gender justice through Islamic teachings. Survivors' use of prayer, dhikr, and Qur'anic reflection illustrates a hidden agency that supports emotional resilience and gradual empowerment. Bridging formal legal protections with culturally and religiously grounded education and advocacy is essential. Ultimately, creating safer pathways for survivors requires legal reform, theological engagement, and community-based efforts that honor both justice and spiritual dignity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several strategic recommendations can be proposed to improve the legal, religious, and community-level responses to domestic violence within the context of Islamic family law in Indonesia:

1. Enhance legal literacy through community-based education.
It is recommended that legal institutions and civil society organizations collaborate to conduct public education campaigns that improve community knowledge of the Domestic Violence Law (UU KDRT) and the Kompilasi Hukum Islam. Educational materials should be culturally contextualized and delivered through accessible formats in local languages to reach rural and low-literacy populations.
2. Facilitate gender-sensitive religious training for clerics.
Religious leaders should be actively engaged in gender justice initiatives by participating in capacity-building programs that emphasize compassionate and egalitarian interpretations of Islamic texts. Collaborations with institutions such as the Women's Ulema Congress (KUPI) are essential for developing an inclusive religious discourse that supports survivors of domestic violence.
3. Develop hybrid models linking adat and formal legal mechanisms.
It is advisable to integrate community mediation practices with legal safeguards to bridge the gap between customary (adat) dispute resolution and formal Islamic family law. This includes training mediators and religious court staff to recognize when cases require legal rather than informal resolution, ensuring cultural sensitivity and survivor protection.
4. Incorporate faith-based healing into survivor support services.
Given the spiritual coping strategies observed among survivors, support programs should consider integrating faith-based elements such as dhikr, Qur'anic reflection, and religious counseling into psychosocial interventions. Such integration may enhance survivors' resilience and promote culturally relevant pathways to recovery.
5. Support community-led religious and legal advocacy for women.
Grassroots organizations should be empowered to conduct women-centered education initiatives, particularly in religious study forums (majlis tackle), that address domestic violence from both Islamic and statutory legal perspectives. These initiatives are crucial to challenging the culture of silence and promoting rights awareness among women in conservative settings.
6. Encourage interdisciplinary research and regional case mapping.
Future studies should adopt interdisciplinary approaches to explore how Islamic legal reasoning, social norms, and customary law intersect in diverse regions. Empirical research, particularly in under-studied provinces like Riau, will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how domestic violence is mediated within Islamic family law contexts across Indonesia.

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