

## **Challenges in Supporting Women’s Recovery from Sexual Violence in a Village Setting: Addressing Social Structures in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, Aceh**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the structural challenges in the formation of advocacy policies for female victims of sexual violence in Gampong Meurandeh, Langsa City, Aceh. The data collection process utilized the participatory action research method over four months. Drawing upon social structure theory, the article argues that the causes of sexual violence in rural communities are not only rooted in knowledge and culture but also in the social structures that operate within these communities. The research findings indicate that the reluctance of village authorities to engage in the formulation of sexual violence policies is impeding the successful execution of sexual violence prevention programs. The article highlights two factors that hinder the prevention of sexual violence in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah. Firstly, lack of female representation in the

village government. Secondly, support for victims of sexual violence is not a primary concern in the village government's policies. The article concludes that sexual violence prevention programs implemented in patriarchal communities require not only a change in public knowledge but also interventions at the structural level.

**Keywords:** Aceh, sexual violence, social structures, village, women.

## A. Introduction

This article discusses the issue of sexual violence in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, Aceh, by examining the social structure as the main factor hindering the sexual violence prevention program in rural communities. Previous studies on sexual violence and patriarchal society have shown that religious knowledge (Febriandi et al., 2021; Natar, 2020; Sofiani, 2021; Takyi & Lamptey, 2020; Watts & Belser, 2014) and culture (Farid, 2019; Foster & Minwalla, 2018; Nisa & Rahmita, 2019; Sofiani, 2021) play a strong role as the cause of sexual violence. However, the findings in this article show that sexual violence not only arises from a lack of knowledge and culture but also from support from the social structure. The research was conducted in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah and found that there was no initiative or support from the village government to prevent sexual violence. Due to the influence of a patriarchal culture that shapes the community structure (Galtung, 1969). Therefore, acts of violence against women are considered normal and acceptable (Wilson et al., 2018). Therefore, this article raises research questions as follows: How does the social structure influence the advancement of sexual violence prevention programs in patriarchal communities? What is the impact of this situation on the availability of assistance for sexual violence victims?

In research conducted by Dahlia Madanih et al. (2018),

the social structure in Aceh views the issue of sexual violence as the fault of women, rather than a societal condition. Madanih et al. (2018) not only highlighted the negative experiences of adult women but also underage girls and found that community neglect of the victims' conditions resulted in revictimization. The research findings are consistent with the findings of Febriandi et al. (2021), which demonstrate the injustice in the process of resolving cases of sexual violence in Aceh. Febriandi et al.'s (2021) findings reinforce Madanih et al.'s (2018) statement that sexual violence in Aceh needs to be seen as a structural issue. This article further examines the findings of Febriandi (2021) and Madanih et al. (2018) by focusing on the difficulties caused by the social structure's inequality in preventing sexual violence at the village level. During the data collection process, the government of Meurandeh Dayah gampong often stated that the issue of sexual violence was caused by women's fault in exposing their aurat (body parts that should be covered according to Islamic teachings). As a result, the government of Gampong Meurandeh Dayah did not see it as their responsibility to protect victims of sexual violence.

This article focuses on a case study conducted in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, Langsa, to highlight the role of village officials, religious leaders, and women's groups in preventing sexual violence in the village. Gampong Meurandeh Dayah is a densely populated village due to the presence of two state universities, Samudera Langsa University, and IAIN Langsa, resulting in many buildings being used as boarding houses in this location. As a result, many newcomers settle in this village, especially female students from outside of Aceh. This situation has made the village vulnerable to violence and harassment, particularly concerning the safety of boarding houses and free mingling around the village. Additionally, residents from other villages also come to Gampong Meurandeh Dayah. Unfortunately, this situation is exacerbated by the lack of rules set by the Gampong

Meurandeh Dayah government to prevent sexual violence and harassment. The article aims to emphasize the crucial role of village officials, religious leaders, and women's groups in creating a safe and secure environment in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah. Despite the absence of any preventive measures, these actors can still work together to create a safer community. For instance, village officials can create and implement regulations to prevent sexual violence and harassment, while religious leaders can educate their congregation on the importance of respecting women's dignity and their role in society. Women's groups, on the other hand, can play a significant role in empowering women to speak out against any form of violence or harassment and advocating for their rights.

This article is based on a PAR (Participatory Action Research) method (Kindon et al., 2007) conducted from September to December 2022 in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah. During the research process, the author conducted interviews with women's groups, the pageu gampong (village security team), village officials, and religious figures to obtain in-depth information regarding their experiences in dealing with sexual violence in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah. The gathered information was then discussed with the village government officials, women's groups in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, and youth groups using the FGD (Focus Group Discussion) method to focus the discussions on the issues gathered by the author (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Throughout the research process, the author also observed the conditions of the infrastructure and facilities in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah. The initial objective of the research was to jointly analyze the needs, and problems, and find solutions to issues related to sexual violence with the village officials. The initial hope was to achieve transformative results and establish a working group to protect women victims of sexual violence at the village level (Dariyo & Tumanggor, 2022; Sofiani, 2021). However, the author encountered many obstacles and

challenges in the field during the research process, which were analyzed using a descriptive analysis approach. Throughout the analysis, the author maintained the PAR paradigm, which focuses on systematic data collection and analysis used to generate practical knowledge.

Using Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence, this article examines the structural barriers faced by the support team in establishing a working group to protect women who have experienced sexual violence in Gampong Meurandeh, initiated by IAIN Langsa. In his theory, Galtung (1969) posits that social structures can enable discrimination against the roles and positions of women in society, which in turn affects women's access to justice. In this article, the author uses this perspective to examine the inequality that exists in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah in terms of addressing incidents of sexual violence where women are still seen as perpetrators rather than victims (Febriandi et al., 2021; Kloos, 2014). This is the main reason why building prevention programs for sexual violence in the community has been challenging, due to the structural barriers that do not support gender equality (Cross Riddle, 2017; Niu & Laidler, 2015).

Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, located in the Langsa Lama district, was established in 2010 through a regulation issued by the Langsa City government. This area is home to two prestigious universities - IAIN Langsa and Universitas Negeri Samudera Langsa. Previously a part of Gampong Muerandeh, Gampong Meurandeh Dayah has since split into three smaller villages. Most of this region is covered in palm oil plantations owned by PTPN 1 Aceh, with the remainder being a swampy forest area crossing the Sidoarjo River. Originally, the people living in this area were migrant workers employed in the palm oil plantations, resulting in a diverse mix of ethnicities. However, the Acehnese people remain the dominant population, followed by the Javanese and Melayu.

Following the establishment of the two universities in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, significant changes have occurred, transforming this once-quiet village into a bustling hub of activity. Currently, numerous shops, guest houses, Islamic boarding schools, and coffee shops are scattered throughout the area. Furthermore, various housing projects have been initiated, leading to a rise in population density, making it one of the most densely populated areas in Langsa. The locals' occupations now vary greatly, ranging from government employees working on campus to student dormitory owners. Public facilities in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah are also considered complete, with one health clinic, a regional bank, kindergartens, and schools, all actively used by the community.

Most of the residents of Gampong Meurandeh Dayah are internal migrants from Langsa who have opened businesses, along with students from outside the city. While some have bought land and settled down, others are only renting temporarily. This has resulted in difficulties for the village government in identifying and registering all residents. During several interviews, village officials expressed their concern regarding this issue. There have been numerous cases where residents lived in the village for six months or longer without reporting their presence. Officials do not know the background of these individuals, making it difficult to identify them if a report is filed, including in cases of sexual harassment and assault. For instance, the chairman of the Gampong Meurandeh Dayah Youth Association reported that when the village officials received a report of sexual harassment, they discovered that the perpetrator had already moved out of the area. This scenario is prevalent because previous residents of Gampong Meurandeh Dayah often leave markers on the dormitories of female students.

The fact that the village chief and most village officials are males is an indication of the gender imbalance in the social structure of the village. Currently, 80% of the office staff in the

village are men, and there are more men involved in the *tuha peut* board.<sup>1</sup> As a result, decisions made during village meetings related to the village's situation are often determined by the majority vote of men. This situation can perpetuate the gender imbalance in the social structure of the village, as men hold more power and influence in decision-making processes. The lack of representation of women's voices and perspectives in these meetings can limit the effectiveness and inclusivity of village governance. To promote gender equality and improve the participation of women in village decision-making, efforts are needed to increase women's representation in the office staff and *tuha peut* board, as well as to promote a more equitable distribution of power and decision-making authority. This can create power dynamics that favor men and limit the participation and influence of women in decision-making processes. Additionally, the presence of male-dominated leadership can reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate the discrimination and violence that women and girls face in the community. Addressing this imbalance requires efforts to promote gender equality and encourage the participation and leadership of women in village governance and decision-making.

The social structure in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah is influenced by cultural and historical factors that shape norms, values, and practices (Brown et al., 2015; Kennedy, 2015; Sallan Gül, 2013). Sociologist theories, such as Kloos (2018) suggest that social structures serve a purpose in society, such as maintaining order and stability. In the context of Meurandeh Daya, the social hierarchy based on gender status and position in society may serve to maintain the traditional way of life and cultural values. However, prior kinds of literature (Afrianty, 2016, 2018;

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<sup>1</sup>Tuha Peut is a traditional board comprised of government representatives, religious leaders, and traditional leaders. In Indonesian Law Number 11 of 2006, this board is responsible for promoting traditional customs and laws in Acehese society.

Ansor, 2014; Febriandi et al., 2021) argue that social structures in Aceh can be oppressive and perpetuate inequality, especially for marginalized groups such as women. This article shows that the discrimination and violence that women face in Acehese villages can be attributed to the patriarchal norms and values that are deeply embedded in the social structure.

## **B. Discussion**

Sexual violence is a pervasive problem in many villages around the world, including those in Indonesia (Khasanah et al., 2020). However, the root causes of this issue are often related to larger structural issues that are present in the village's social structure (Farid, 2019; Natar, 2020). Various forms of violence stem from the interaction of patriarchy with structural factors such as culture and economic opportunity (Sheikhbardsiri et al., 2017). To assess the degree of structural violence, different methods of assessment have been proposed by investigators and theorists. Heise advocates for an integrated ecological framework that can account for personal, situational, and sociocultural factors. Ntenda et al. (2018) emphasize the interrelated effects of contextual and community-level factors, individual and household-level characteristics, and women's autonomy. Some researchers (Nisa & Rahmita, 2019; Niu & Laidler, 2015) focus on the connection between armed conflict and violence against women in their homes. Our findings suggest that it is crucial to examine the interplay between structural gender inequalities, gender performances, accountability, and gender identities to understand how they either enable or hinder coercive control.

The high number of cases of sexual violence in Aceh, as recorded by the Regional Technical Implementation Unit for Women and Children's Protection (UPTD PPA) in Aceh, reaching up to 697 cases as of September 2021, presents a significant challenge for the government. Despite the urgent need for support



and assistance for victims, the government's limited capacity to provide such services has made it difficult to handle these cases seriously. While current literature suggests that there is a lack of significant initiative from the government to improve programs for protecting women victims of sexual violence in Aceh, one village, Gampong Meurandeh, stands out as having adequate bureaucratic infrastructure and independent management of its village funds. However, even with these resources, the village still does not have a working group dedicated to addressing the issue of sexual violence against women.

One of the challenges faced in Gampong Meurandeh is the lack of initiative and ability among the village government officials to form such a working group. This issue is further compounded by the absence of involvement from academics and the lack of support from the regional government. Moreover, with the increasing number of students living in Gampong Meurandeh and the opening of new businesses, the village has become densely populated, particularly with newcomers. Unfortunately, several reports received orally from residents indicate that there are many cases of sexual harassment experienced by female students and residents of Gampong Meurandeh, yet the perpetrators have not been brought to justice as village officials have not taken the issue of sexual harassment seriously. Given the high potential for sexual violence in Gampong Meurandeh in the future, the village government officials, regional government, and academics must work together to create programs that are proactive in addressing the issue of sexual violence. This includes providing support and assistance for victims, training programs for government officials, and awareness-raising campaigns for the general public. By taking these steps, it is hoped that the village can become a safer place for women and prevent any potential escalation of sexual violence.

This article employs the concept of structural violence introduced by Johan Galtung (1969). Structural violence refers

to the notion that an act of violence occurs due to structural inequalities (power) at the systemic level. In the issue of violence against women, Johan Galtung (1969) provides an example of a society that has endemic violence against women (an issue that is very commonly found in a particular society). Structural inequalities are particularly detrimental to women due to the intersection of gender with existing conditions such as inadequate education, patriarchal culture and different access to justice, and public role gaps (Ashrafun & Säävälä, 2014; Neuman et al., 2018; Sallan Gül, 2013). The tendency of society to place violence against women as an authority of private space (family and religion) in this theoretical perspective also becomes a problem for the violence experienced by women (Galtung, 1969).

The theoretical explanation of violence against women developed in this article aims to understand the factors that influence women's access to sexual violence support. The concept of structural violence used in this study focuses on sexual harassment, rape, and sexual violence experienced by women. The theoretical analysis used does not exclude the broader context and inequality that underlies various forms of violence in women's lives (Khan & Khan, 2016). This means that the structural analysis not only looks at instrumental aspects and institutions but also refers to everyday violence at the micro-interaction level such as sexual or physical harassment or assault that can occur between family members, close friends, acquaintances, or strangers (Niu & Laidler, 2015). The important role of the structural concept is to form a hypothesis that the community's understanding of the sexual violence that occurs and is experienced happens because of economic, legal, and political factors; all of which are known to play an important role in determining women's relations in society. This article shows that the issue of sexual violence in Meurandeh Dayah village is hindered by two factors. First, the imbalance of women's representation in the village government. Second, the intention

of the village officials to create policies that are friendly to sexual violence victims is hindered by the village's budgetary capacity.

As shown by Munawiah & Kamaliah (2017), the involvement of women in village government in Aceh is a major concern in increasing the role of village governments in promoting the welfare of women. However, the gender composition imbalance in village governments often exacerbates these efforts. As demonstrated by Kloos (2018), women in Aceh receive a negative stigma when cases of moral violations occur. This negative stigma also occurs in patriarchal societies such as in India, where Ahmad et al. (2016) showed that efforts to prevent the continued impact of sexual violence against women in Uttar Pradesh are often hindered by prevailing social structures in villages. Borrowing from Galtung's theory (1969), sexual violence occurs due to gender inequality, where women and girls are perceived as weaker and more vulnerable. When a gender composition imbalance occurs in the village government, it then affects decision-making and the implementation of policies related to the prevention and handling of sexual violence.

As demonstrated by Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, village governance is dominated by men, resulting in women's interests not being taken seriously or even ignored. Currently, Gampong Meurandeh Dayah is led by a male Keuchik (village head) and male Village Secretary. During discussions to map out issues related to sexual violence, the attendees were dominated by men. Garis and Trisnia (2021) state that the absence of women in village politics can reinforce the existing patriarchal culture in the village and neglect the protection of women and girls.

Usually, when there's a report about an amoral issue like rape or sexual crimes, only male village officials handle it, like Mr. Imam, Mr. Keuchik, and the head of youth. Women usually just become witnesses, and they're never asked for their opinions during our meetings (interview, Buk Yuni, 2022).

The excerpt from an interview with a member of the women's group in the village shows the gender bias in the village government system, where women's interests and experiences are not considered in decision-making. In this case, women are not only ignored but also deemed to have no valuable contribution or knowledge about the issues at hand.

According to Mrs. Siti, the mentoring process carried out by external parties should provide useful recommendations for the village government and related institutions in improving the quality of public services in the village. For example, the village government can improve the capacity of village staff, especially by adding women's roles through training or developing mentoring programs to enhance their ability to solve issues of violence against women and harassment of women. However, on the other hand, we also received contradictory statements from the local Village Head, who stated that the village government has made various efforts to improve women's roles in resolving issues of sexual violence but is constrained by budget limitations and the willingness of women's groups.

This article shows that the gender composition imbalance in village government can also affect women's access to adequate services and security. This is because women's needs and rights are not well met, increasing the risk of sexual violence. Women's participation in village meetings is crucial to ensure their voices are heard and their interests are considered in decision-making.

To address this issue, the village government needs to ensure that the gender composition in the village government is balanced and reflects the interests and needs of all village residents. In addition, the village government should increase awareness and education about gender equality and promote a culture that prevents and rejects sexual violence. Protection and handling of sexual violence should also be a priority in the village government's plans and policies.

During interviews with several residents of Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, the author found that sexual violence and harassment are often not reported to authorities. This is because most people are not aware that such actions constitute sexual violence and harassment. In some cases, sexual violence and harassment are even considered to be seclusion (*khalwat*), which is an intimate act between unmarried partners. According to some respondents, *khalwat* is done voluntarily and there are no clear victims or perpetrators.

After mapping the problem related to the low participation of women in sexual violence advocacy, the author designed a meeting to assess the capacity of the Gampong officials in terms of legal knowledge and the advocacy process for sexual violence victims. The author did not act as a facilitator but invited three experts in the process to facilitate the meeting and training. The Public Relations Department of Langsa Police gave socialization on rules related to sexual violence, while Buk Dedek from the Langsa DPRK provided an understanding of the advocacy process for sexual violence victims. In addition, Buk Meka, as the Head of the Legal Department of the Langsa City Government, facilitated how to make village rules, funding for safe houses for sexual violence victims, and the role of Gampong Meurandeh Dayah government officials. The results of these meetings provided a lot of information related to the root problem in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, such as the lack of Gampong government support in addressing sexuality issues in village policies. This can be seen in the minimal design and formulation that focuses on organizing strategies for preventing sexual violence in the community.

This problem then impacts the service of accompanying sexual violence and harassment victims. However, the existence of a safe house is very important in serving victims of violence and harassment. The Gampong government is a state actor, therefore it has full responsibility for public protection. The rampant issue

of sexual violence and harassment in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah is a threat to the comfort and is the responsibility of the Gampong because these criminal actions have serious impacts on the victims. Therefore, the government must take exclusive steps towards the necessary policies to address the developing issues in the community so that the crimes can be immediately suppressed.

During the FGD process, young people in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah only learned that actions they had previously considered as *khalwat* could potentially be acts of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Sexual violence actions included molestation that occurred in rented rooms. In addition, there were actions to seduce young girls with vulgar expressions and degrading women. This was not realized because the perpetrators of these violent actions were close to the victims, such as boyfriends, uncles, and neighbors.

After several meetings and training on legal knowledge and the advocacy process for sexual violence victims, the community began to understand that sexual violence and harassment actions are forms of violence that harm the victims and should not be left alone. They also began to understand that sexual violence and harassment actions are not *khalwat* actions and should be dealt with firmly by the authorities. Sexual violence and harassment against women are now not only recognized as legal problems but also as educational problems. It should be realized that sexual violence cases are often associated with declining community morality. Usually, this is associated with the increasing cases of pornography, especially through the internet and social media. Therefore, the causes of sexual violence and harassment are not only due to the lack of community morality but also to the existence of structural inequalities at the level of power that benefit the perpetrators and harm the victims.

Johan Galtung (1969) coined the term “structural violence” to describe violence against women that occurs due to structural

inequalities in power. In issues of violence against women, Galtung (1969) gave an example of a society that has an epidemic of violence against women. Structural inequality is particularly harmful to women due to gender intersectionality with existing conditions such as inadequate education, patriarchal culture, different access to the law, and a gap in public roles. The societal push to place the violence experienced by women under the authority of private spaces (family and religion) in this theory also contributes to the violence experienced by women.

In many societies, women are a gender group that faces significant challenges in obtaining their fundamental rights (Haitami, 2016; Natar, 2020; Sen & Majumder, 2015). Despite international law agreeing that the elimination of discrimination against women must be fulfilled by all nations (Aghtaie, 2011), women are still facing challenges in realizing their rights. The international regulations outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women state that discrimination based on sex should not occur. This rule prohibits all forms of sexual discrimination, including discrimination in education. Women should be protected from sexual violence and freed from fear, including fear from their communities. The international community recognizes women as a vulnerable group that is still subjected to sexual discrimination.

In patriarchal societies, sexual violence is a complex issue that is intertwined with knowledge inequality (Foster & Minwalla, 2018; Novels et al., 2014; Wazid et al., 2016). This knowledge gap creates power relations between perpetrators and victims of sexual violence and harassment. It is therefore highly likely that there will be misconceptions about cases of sexual violence and harassment. Sexual violence against women and children is closely related to social and cultural contexts. This was found in the research conducted in Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, where the knowledge of the community, especially the Gampong Meurandeh Dayah officials, is heavily

influenced by the social and cultural context of Acehese society. Gampong officials tend to view sexual violence and harassment as occurring because women are unable to protect themselves. This perspective was frequently encountered by the research team during their investigation.

It is important to note that the cultural context in which sexual violence occurs can significantly impact the perceptions of the community towards the issue. The patriarchal structure of society often places the burden of preventing sexual violence on women, rather than holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. Therefore, education and awareness-raising programs must be designed to address misconceptions and promote a more accurate understanding of the dynamics of sexual violence. By addressing the root causes of sexual violence and promoting gender equality, it is possible to create a society where sexual violence and harassment are not tolerated.

### **C. Conclusion**

Based on the research conducted, it has been found that sexual violence and harassment are complex issues that are not only related to the conditions of the perpetrator and victim but also to social structures. Therefore, comprehensive solutions are needed to address these problems. A legal approach alone, such as law enforcement in court, is not enough as it only affects the perpetrator and victim and does not change the conditions in society. Furthermore, this article offers a perspective on access to a more just and equal social structure. In places like Gampong Meurandeh Dayah, the social structure becomes a challenging factor in developing sexual violence prevention programs. However, this research has limitations in its narrow case study, as it only takes one village. Additionally, the problem limitations and methods used in this article need to be further developed by researchers who have similar issues and research interests.



In conclusion, the issue of sexual violence and harassment is a complex problem that requires a comprehensive approach beyond the legal system. It is essential to address the social structures that contribute to the prevalence of sexual violence and develop prevention programs that are culturally sensitive and inclusive. This article provides valuable insights into the need for a more just and equal social structure as a crucial step toward ending sexual violence and harassment. However, further research is needed to expand the scope of the study and develop more effective prevention strategies.

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