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Domestic violence and Islamic spirituality in Lombok, Indonesia: women's use of Sufi approaches to suffering

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Abstract

This article argues that the Sufi practice of *dhikr* in combination with Quranic recitation and prayer can be understood as "hidden agency" Muslim women exercise in their mediation of violence and piety, particularly so in attempts at lessening their suffering of domestic violence. Our arguments indicate that women actively work towards employing a spiritual approach to their suffering that can be described as Sufi and that they exercise agency in an Islamic way that is bound by their connection with Allah. Our use of the term agency is therefore a nuanced one that is multidimensional and flexible in that it can expand and contract in different circumstances and is at the same time concerned with one's embeddedness in Allah's Divinity. This understanding of agency contrasts with normative sociological and feminist ones that see agency as a human's capacity to act in response to social structures and power relations without necessarily allocating a dimension for an understanding rooted in Divinity. Based on anthropological fieldwork from 2017 to 2020 in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, we explore Muslim women in abusive marriages by engaging the notion of a pluralized agency that women exercise in an Islamic framework. The article further considers ethical tensions feminists face when working with women victims who do not live from a human rights understanding of domestic violence and instead focus on enhancing piety in response to suffering.

Keywords Domestic violence · Polygamy · Women's agency · Hidden agency · Sufism · Islamic spirituality · Islam · Lombok · Indonesia

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Introduction

This article is about Muslim women on the island of Lombok in eastern Indonesia who persist in marriages in which they experience domestic violence. It explores women's efforts at lessening their suffering of such violence through Islamic and, particularly, Sufi practices, including *dhikr* (remembrance),[1] Quranic recitation, and prayer. Our analysis departs from other scholarship on domestic violence in Indonesia that focuses on statistics and prevalence of domestic violence (Afandi et al., 2017; Bennett et al., 2011; Hayati et al., 2011; Noer et al., 2021) by looking at complexities for understanding agency, its limitations, and its plurality in an Islamic framework.

Central to our anthropological examination of these women is our approach to the feminist notion of agency as a fluid one that expands and contracts in relational and different structural circumstances in which women may find themselves across time, space, and context. Based on our informants' subjective experiences, we engage an understanding of agency as plural in the wider Islamic understanding of Divinity. We locate this understanding in the concept of "hidden agency" as one where a woman strives for agentic capacity to expand into Allah where she claims she feels she is able to lessen her suffering while persisting in her situation. It is the concept of "hidden agency" in connection with Sufi practices that we develop in our exploration of women's religious subjectivities. From an Islamic understanding, this kind of agency is directly from Allah and is considered to be "hidden" because it manifests in a person, or, rather here, a woman, in a non-physical, non-linear manner in her inner worlds where she uses, expresses, and draws on it privately as she negotiates with and persists in her discursive realities in her family life and wider community.

Our work is located in a wider discourse on the anthropology of domestic violence that problematizes tensions between Western feminist human rights approaches and local religious-cultural ways women make sense of and respond to violence. While we place our data in a feminist framework which condemns all violence against women and seeks gender justice for women in domestic violence situations, our informants are not living within a society that actively supports such a human rights framework. In fact, the notion of human rights may be foreign or not important to some of these women. This is a dilemma for the feminist anthropologist who does not interfere in the personal lives of her informants because, on the one hand, she can see power inequalities at play and possible ways out but, on the other hand, she is ethically bound to stay neutral, unless her project is specifically action-advocacy based.

Based on our informants' experiences, we use the term "domestic violence" to refer to unhealthy and unequal power relations in marriages where there is use of any physical, emotional, mental, psychological, economic or financial violence through withholding economic support or spending money on extramarital affairs, or sexual violence and betrayal in the form of polygamy or infidelity. As we explore, the women who we examine, while understanding their experiences may be described

[1] *Dhikr* is the practice of chanting or reciting Allah's 99 divine names in specific formulae, or Allah's name in remembrance. It is mostly a Sufi practice and is used for healing and gaining proximity to Allah.

as domestic violence, at the same time, in part claim self-responsibility and fate for their situation due to wider popular Islamic and socio-cultural discourses that place the cause and solution to domestic violence as a female problem.

Research on women who stay in marriages with domestic violence is minimal and therefore is still a growing area in the literature on Indonesia, especially for the island of Lombok. Most research on gender relations in Lombok concerns serial marriage and divorce (Grace, 2004; Nasir, 2016; Platt, 2017; Smith, 2014a), underage marriage (Andriyan et.al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021), and polygamy (Grace, 2004; Smith, 2014a), with only very few studies focused solely on domestic violence (Bennett et al., 2011). This article significantly contributes not only to filling this gap in knowledge about the complexities of domestic violence and gender relations in Lombok, but in Indonesia and the Islamic world more broadly, for the insights it offers into theorizations of hidden Islamic agency from a feminist anthropological perspective.

This article is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted by both authors at separate times from 2017 to 2020 in West and East Lombok and considers vignettes from women who stay in marriages defined by domestic violence. The women were previously known to both authors from former research projects and were willing to share their experiences in order to support efforts at understanding the complexities of women's lives in Lombok. We hope to offer new insights into the practice of hidden agency in a Muslim context by showing how women hold different levels of agentic capacity in relational ways to structure, which may also ultimately limit it, and further show how when this happens, that women claim to expand it into a dialogue with Divinity which they feel can lessen their suffering. It is this latter concept that we refer to as hidden Islamic agency which we place on the wider agency continuum as plural in its relations with structure, time, space, and context. In doing so, we demonstrate how women use Sufi approaches to lessen their suffering while living with social constraints that normalize violence against women. We note here that our research did not focus on husbands' understandings, mainly because it was very difficult to interview them given the sensitivity surrounding domestic violence and male authority in the gender hierarchies that frame women's and men's family lives in Lombok.

Domestic violence and piety in Indonesia

At the beginning of 2022, fragments of a lecture by a popular Indonesian female celebrity preacher, Oki Setiana Dewi (OSD),[2] went viral on social media for her comments on the issue of women and domestic violence. In her lecture, OSD told a story about a family in Jeddah as follows: "A husband and wife were arguing. The husband was very angry with his wife, and then the wife was hit in the face. His wife cried, and suddenly the doorbell rang. When his wife opened the door with puffy eyes, it turned out that it was her mother. Her husband from a distance was

[2] See https://youtu.be/DehBc7weum4

nervous, muttering: 'God!, my wife must have complained to her parents that she had just been beaten.' However, his wife chose not to tell or even to lie, instead saying that she was crying because of a deep longing for her parents and she was even more touched when her prayer to meet her mother was granted by God with her mother's arrival. Because of this incident, the husband loved his wife even more." Concluding the story, OSD said that women do not need to discuss the disgraces of their husbands with anyone, including parents. Instead, she advised that a woman needs to be patient because it will melt her husband's heart.

OSD's comments are not uncommon in Indonesia and the wider Muslim world. This is in part due to the widely accepted (but also contested) Quranic teaching that a husband may hit his wife if she is disobedient (Hasiah and Prasetyo, 2021; Zuhdi et al., 2019). The contents of OSD's lecture further represent wider Indonesian discourses on women's familial roles and responsibilities, and indeed reproduce wider ideas about domestic violence being a woman's responsibility because she is seen as both its cause and its solution in her role as wife and mother and thus the one responsible for maintaining family harmony (Stalans, 1996; Utomo, 2012). OSD's lecture went viral and sparked controversy. Many listeners active in online media disagreed with the contents of the lecture, accusing her of normalizing violence against women and disrespecting State Law (No. 23, 2004) concerning the Elimination of Domestic Violence.

Despite such concerns, the government's Zero Tolerance Policy for domestic violence continues to be an ongoing issue. Noer et al. (2021) claim that data on domestic violence in Indonesia are significantly underrepresented and are therefore a weak indication of the reality of the prevalence of domestic violence in the country. They go on to suggest that despite the number of cases increasing from year to year, that its occurrence is far more widespread than what the statistics and data indicate due to problems faced during data collection processes by government and feminist non-government agencies. The Indonesian National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas-Perempuan, 2022) claims the same point, positing that the 338,496 cases reported in 2021 are not a correct representation of the actual number of domestic violence cases. An area where we do have access to reliable statistics is that of the Islamic law courts. Interestingly, we cannot overlook the fact that statistics reveal that there are also increasingly higher numbers of women initiating divorces in Islamic law courts in Indonesia each year[3] (Wardatun & Smith, 2020). These statistics do not tell us the number of women reporting the different kinds of domestic violence (physical, sexual, psychological, and so on), but they do reveal that women are increasingly willing to file for divorce. Having said this, popular Islamic discourses on domestic violence do not always concur with those from the state and its laws, and for

[3] In 2021, divorce increased sharply, namely 447,743 cases (53.50%) compared to 291,677 cases in 2020 which was the lowest year of divorce in the last five years (2017–2021). From these data, we can see that 337,343 cases were female-initiated (75%) and only 110,440 cases (24.66%) were male-initiated ones. See Cindy Mutia Annur (2022).

women whose lived realities are framed by such Islamic understandings, life with domestic violence becomes normalized.

The controversy surrounding OSD's lecture arises in part due to the different ways domestic violence is interpreted and understood across local cultures and social institutions. Clearly, the Indonesian government has implemented a human rights approach in accordance with the United Nations, yet in lived reality, especially in Muslim societies, there are alternative approaches to understanding domestic violence that are in conflict with a human rights approach, and even if they are in alignment with it, it does not mean that women have full or partial capacity to exercise their agency in order to remove themselves from their marriages. This is where our argument that agency is limited and limiting is revealed most pertinently, as other research also shows (see Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Hay, 2005; McCleary-Sills et al., 2016; Parker, 2005; Parker & Dales, 2014). Later we develop this position further when we discuss at length the notion of an Islamic agency as part of a continuum of plural agencies, particularly hidden ones, that women may engage across different times, spaces, and contexts.

Scholars have shown that researching how gender relations play out in marriages in Indonesia is complex and an analysis needs to be inclusive of a range of factors that inhibit women from actively removing themselves from unhealthy and violent marriages (Faizah, 2016; Maimun & Rais, 2018). In fact, anthropological insights reveal that domestic violence may not even be perceived as violence from local perspectives when violence has become normalized (McCleary-Sills et al., 2016). Having said this, many women are prevented from acquiring legal divorce due to socio-cultural restrictions placed upon them and the associated shame that goes along with being a divorced woman is often enough to deter women from pursuing it (Jones, 1994; O'Shaughnessy, 2009; Smith, 2014b; Wardatun & Smith, 2020).

Add to this the role of Islamic discourse in shaping women's ideas about marriage and suffering, especially in relation to the Quranic statement on hitting disobedient wives. The use of religious teachings that emphasize "patience" as a female responsibility in dealing with problems, such as in OSD's viral lecture, has become so widespread and common that it is applied as a solution to all kinds of hardships including the issue of domestic violence. The intersection between a personal choice to persist in a "dangerous" household where a woman's mental health and physical safety are at stake, and religious-cultural expectations surrounding a woman's responsibility for maintaining family harmony, is a very complex one.

Anthropological research has shown that when women live in or nearby their natal homes and have husbands join them in uxorilocality, incidences of domestic violence are minimal and are more likely to end in divorce due to women's access to support systems (Grace, 2004). This is not always the case, as Aisyah and Parker (2014) in their research concerning domestic violence against Indonesian women indicate that the agency expressed by women through self-choice marriage can come back to bite them later, demonstrated by cases where women flee domestic violence only to find their families' refusal to take them back. Similar accounts relating to women's agency are also observed by Butt and Munro (2007) in connection with pre-marital pregnancies of young women in Papua. These pregnancies indicate a free expression

of sexual desire, but the hardship the women endure as a consequence disempowers them.

Such research on agency therefore reveals that agency has limits to its capacity. Our arguments can be placed together with those put forward by Campbell and Mannell (2016:1) in their work on women's agency in international development contexts. Overall, they call for a more pluralized approach to women's agency, rather than one focused on individual action including reporting cases of domestic violence and leaving a violent marriage at the expense of overlooking intersecting socio-cultural complexes that prevent women from taking such or any action at all. They point out that most research on domestic violence engages a binary model of gender and power (e.g., "men-women" and "victim-agent") rather than exploring multiple and alternative forms of agency and the complexity embedded within these violent settings. They go on to build a way to look at the distribution of agency on a continuum which places complexity at its core:

> …[neglect of complexity] … obscures the multiplicities of women's agency including the competing challenges they juggle alongside IPV (Intimate Partner Violence), differing levels of response, and the temporality of agency. We outline a notion of 'distributed agency' as a multi-level, incremental and non-linear process distributed across time, space and social networks, and across a continuum of action ranging from survival to resistance. (Campbell & Mannell, 2016:1).

How agency is distributed, temporal, and played out across space and context is determined by many factors including women's access to legal services, finances, support networks, security, transport and housing, health services, and employment, in combination with religious, socio-cultural, and gender discourses on ideal femininity and shame, marriage, and motherhood that seek to keep them from expanding into more supportive or healthy spaces. Again, such discourses are at the core of OSD's viral lecture which reproduces the understanding that a woman is both the source and solution to domestic violence in her marriage. Depending on what kind of social reality a woman lives in, and whether she has children with her, will significantly determine her capacity to fulfil her agentic action. Her agency may take her out of her home through her access to support networks, yet it may halt in a dead-end because she is lacking in finances or is unemployed and so she becomes dependent on her family and must find new avenues to continue her expression of agency. In other cases, such as ones we will discuss later, women in marriages defined by domestic violence may have control of their own economic resources and live affluent lives with family support networks, and yet still persist in the marriage in pursuit of piety and a never-ending striving to subscribe to normalized Islamic gender norms.

The intersection between domestic violence, piety, and agency, therefore, is much more complex than simply a set of individual responses to situations framed by socio-cultural structures and discourses; it is distributive and temporal in its capacity to expand, contract, and limit. In accordance with our informants' understanding of domestic violence as unhealthy relations with their husbands that causes physical, emotional, psychological, mental, and economic harm and suffering, as well as

being something that they perceive they can change through piety in prayer and dialogue with Allah, this article attempts to provide a portrait of women's hidden agency in their experiences of domestic violence and their mitigations of it through Islamic spirituality. What is common to all of the women is that they claim to find an internal strength through their proximity to Allah which they understand is a result of being patient and sincere in accepting their hardships. What becomes clear is that the mitigation of domestic violence through Islamic spirituality is not something we can bind to class, status, age, or education alone, but it is one that any woman may face entirely because of her femaleness.

Between fortune and fate in Lombok

Lombok is a small island located to the east of Bali in the Nusa Tenggara Barat province together with Sumbawa island. The total population of Lombok is approximately 4 million. The indigenous Sasak Muslims make up the majority of the population together with a Sasak Buddhist minority, followed by Sumbawans and Bimanese from the neighbouring Sumbawa island, as well as Balinese Hindus, Javanese, Bugis, Arabs, Chinese Christians, and Buddhists, along with others from further east in Flores and Papua, and elsewhere in Indonesia. Scholars tend to describe Lombok as "less-developed" than other parts of Indonesia (Bennett et al., 2011), but we point out that this is changing and with the instalment of indigenous Governors in the post-Suharto era (post-2008),[4] Lombok, in particular, has changed significantly in a number of areas including now having better access to public health for women and children, better access to more affordable housing, increased efforts to improve sanitation and the ongoing improvement of infrastructure, wider access to higher education, and developments in the tourism industry.

Just over a decade ago, Bennett et al. (2011) conducted a large-scale project on local definitions of domestic violence in Nusa Tenggara Barat and found that the majority of informants shared the human rights definition of domestic violence,[5] but in practice were constricted and prevented from seeking ways out of domestic violence. Their (Bennett et al., 2011:136) research states that in comparison to domestic violence in other countries, incidents in Lombok and Sumbawa at that time could be described as moderate. They argue that Indonesian state law does not always successfully penetrate or uphold in cultures and societies that prioritize local customary law known as *adat* over state law and thus shapes women's marital experiences. In Lombok, *adat* continues to shape lived realities in the realm of family life. Having said this, it is also the case that the former Governor and the current one have made some headway into bringing the state into the lives of ordinary people, including striving towards registering the majority of births,

[4] This refers to the downfall of ex-authoritarian president Suharto and the onset of democracy.

[5] Domestic violence is also known as domestic abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV). A broad definition refers to behaviour based on unequal power relations intended to overpower and control a partner through physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions, including violence and threats.

marriages, and divorces with the state. Domestic violence, however, is still an issue that requires more research into understanding how people negotiate or mitigate it in families and the wider community.

Literature on gender in Lombok for the most part concerns marriage, divorce, and maternal and child health (Bennett, 2005; Grace, 2004; Hay, 2005; Nasir, 2016; Platt, 2017; Smith, 2014a; Wardatun, 2018). We find reasons for this being multiple ones including a high rate of serial marriage and divorce; underage marriage as cultural practice; a high rate of migrant workers abroad which leads to divorce, remarriage, and neglected children; issues of malnutrition, high rates of child morbidity and stunting; a high rate of youth who leave school early; high rates of unemployment and poverty; and, until recently, a significant lack of government concern for education and health, particularly maternal and child health. Open defecation and sanitation remain issues facing local governments together with water shortages, increasing prevalence of natural disasters including earthquakes and floods, and a history of social conflict.

In Lombok's changing society, marriage and divorce are sites where personal lives and public rules are contested and negotiated in response to the aforementioned structural and discursive points. Marriage that ends in divorce is not always a linear process but becomes a continuum that describes the complex dynamics in women's lives as depicted in Sasak women's marriages. Research on marriage and divorce for Sasak women reveals their personal autonomy in dealing with the intertwining of three legal systems, Islamic law, customary law, and state law that regulate family life (Bennett, 2005; Grace, 2004; Platt, 2017; Smith, 2014a), combined with a broader understanding of patriarchal domination and the ways women can resist it (Nasir, 2016; Smith, 2014a). When trying to make sense of different kinds of agency in Muslim societies, we are therefore confronted with a multiple set of discursive contexts which show how agency is relational and limited/ing at the same time (see Smith, 2014a). In this kind of plural setting, we cannot make sweeping generalizations about women and agency bound by class, educational status, and so on, but rather, the research tells us that women's experiences in marriage are complex as they relate across structural settings.

Islam in Lombok is characterized by the two largest national Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdhatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as Lombok's largest local Islamic organization Nahdhatul Wathan, together with a number of other Salafi organizations and Sufi orders usually affiliated with Nahdhatul Ulama. Islamic discourses on gender and marriage across these organizations are relatively similar and tend to emphasize a woman's responsibility to solve her marital problems. In Lombok, like elsewhere in Indonesia and the Muslim world, the dominant understanding is that a woman must be patient in facing her family problems and continue in her efforts to ask Allah to forgive her sins and give her strength.

In the aforementioned religious organizations, the interpretation of the husband-and-wife relationship is still male-centred, although it should also be noted that a counter-narrative for an egalitarian understanding has begun, especially in Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, and women are actively participating in reinterpreting the Qur'an as an epistemological foundation for that movement (Anwar, 2018; Doorn-Harder, 2010; Smith & Woodward, 2014). More recently, the Female

Indonesian Ulama Congress (KUPI), a movement initiated by Indonesian female Ulama groups in the Nahdlatul Ulama organization, issued a jurist opinion (fatwa) on gender issues including violence against women (Künkler & Nisa, 2017, 2018; Nisa, 2019; Rohmaniyah et al., 2022). Some female Ulama from Lombok were invited to participate in this congress, and they are also actively preparing for the second congress that will be held in Semarang, Central Java, in 2022. It is yet to be seen how these female Ulama–issued fatwa will play out in societies such as those in Lombok where patriarchy and Islam work to keep women in an ideological container shaped by motherhood and domesticity.

In Lombok, Tuan Guru are Muslim male religious authorities with great power and status in transmitting Islamic knowledge to the Sasak people. As Cederroth (1995:80) writes, a "tuan guru is regarded as a person above ordinary human beings. He is close to Allah and because of this cannot do anything wrong." The practice of polygamy is pervasive in Sasak society among Tuan Guru in orthodox Islamic communities (see Smith, 2014a) and also among ordinary men who perceive that having marital affairs through polygamy is a normal process and an Islamic-justified marriage. Even more unfortunate is that many of these Sasak Muslim men, while knowing that marital affairs could lead to divorce and re-marriage, consider re-marriage as a legitimate way for expressing love and intimacy (Platt, 2012). In this context, polygamy is not considered to be a form of sexual violence that causes great emotional suffering for women.

In fact, in the permissive culture of violence in Lombok, as well as Indonesia more broadly, there is an analogy used to legitimize sexual violence against women in jokes that contain insults by drawing on the notion of a hard erection. The term violence (*kekerasan*) shares the same base term with that for a hard erection (*keras*). One often hears males use this analogy as follows: "if it is not hard, then it can't get in," meaning that sexual violence does not exist because without a hard penis a man cannot have sex. When used in the public arena, this joke is greeted with laughter from the audience.

Domestic violence in Indonesia is usually understood to be physical violence, and unless there is evidence of blood and bruises, people, including police, usually turn a blind eye to cases of emotional, psychological, economic, sexual, and other forms of domestic abuse. A recent example Wardatun collected during a field trip to Bima is that of a woman who was pleading for help from family and neighbours after suffering ongoing emotional violence, but was ignored. When her husband committed physical violence against her, she felt she had nowhere to go and so she uploaded a photo and her story to Facebook. With this action, which went viral, the police were forced to take action. Because physical violence which bears evidence of injury is considered a legitimate form of domestic violence, many women who suffer from physical violence with no signs of wounding or mild wounding often do not have the courage to report incidents to the police because of long and delayed processes and the knowledge that the situation may not change after police intervention. Women therefore keep their suffering and husbands' abuse to themselves and thus contribute to the normalization of violent behaviour.

It must also be pointed out that domestic violence as physical violence is also not tolerated in many communities. During Smith's fieldwork in densely populated urban neighbourhoods in West Lombok in communities where cheap housing

consisting of single brick two-room houses is often wall-to-wall with no privacy between neighbours, women reported that there is very little to no physical violence because neighbours, who often double as family-kin, would intervene if they heard something. Other young women explained that there is socialization about government laws protecting women from domestic violence and that this has led to almost no cases of physical violence. By contrast, Smith's fieldwork in orthodox communities in East Lombok with Tuan Guru households reveals a very different picture characterized by physical violence, as will be demonstrated later. In both of these settings, domestic abuse such as emotional, psychological, financial, and sexual can be categorized as "normalized" and does not attract much discussion or efforts for redress in communities.

The Nusa Tenggara Government has what they call UPTD PPA (Unit Pelaksana Tehnis Daerah Perlindungan Perempuan dan Anak: Technical Unit for the Protection of Women and Children) to handle domestic violence cases. However, there is no clarity in process (what action women and children can take) and no certainty in result (what they will get). There are not enough safety houses or shelters for victims of domestic violence compared to the number of reported cases. The government provides a hotline; however, it is unreliable. There is also legal assistance for women victims of domestic violence through the Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Asosiasi Perempuan untuk Keadilan (Organization for Legal Assistance and Justice for Women), but they are limited in how many women they can assist. Women's wings of the major Islamic organizations mentioned earlier, including Muslimat NU and Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah), work on spreading ideas about how to prevent domestic violence by focusing on shifting male authority–based gender ideology.

Drawing on the complexities of the distributive and temporal and limiting/ed aspects of agency as outlined earlier, together with the social hardships women tend to face in Lombok that we have just described in detail above, here we bring Lombok into focus by placing women's agency on a continuum between fortune and fate in accordance with Sasak Muslim understandings of these concepts. Fortune here refers to *rejeki* which means something good from Allah, while fate, or *nasib*, is usually understood in a negative way as something unfortunate from Allah. At the same time, both fortune and fate are realities Muslims must accept as part of the Islamic faith. Some of the women we present shortly demonstrate that in response to Sasak socio-cultural discourses and Islamic gender norms, it is their fate to have abusive husbands and that they also receive fortune from Allah in the form of children or a successful business. They understand that due to their husbands' bad deeds, they have an opportunity to become closer to Allah. If we place these women's experiences into an Islamic understanding of "distributed agency," we find plurality available in capacity for agency as they move between a distribution of fortune and fate in Lombok's changing society.

As per our informants' Sufi approaches to suffering, we place fortune and fate on a continuum because they are also interchangeable and can be self-restricting or limiting in the lived realities that shape women's experiences and can also be seen as representing the same kind of destiny. Fortune may also present as *dhikr* or prayer or Quranic recitation in its own right and thus brings them some kind of relief from marriage and social hardships, yet this takes place as part of a wider fate and the

Islamic understanding that human lives are predestined. Therefore, a continuum of fortune and fate helps women to persist in, survive, or accept their marriages while working to relieve their pain through Islamic spiritual practices. We find further examples of how agency is distributed when Muslim or Sufi teachers and preachers prescribe *dhikr* and prayers to help women accept or resist their situation, and the kind of advice women receive depends on the views held by the Muslim or Sufi teacher/s and preacher/s with whom they consult. Some male teachers or preachers may prescribe *dhikr* for resisting and leaving a violent husband, while others may prescribe them to help women submit and self-medicate (for more on this in Lombok, see Smith, 2014a).

Later we explore how these women fit into the fortune and fate continuum in terms of constriction and expansion, and that in extreme circumstances when they feel that they have nowhere to turn except to Allah, they embrace a Sufi understanding that there is no difference between fortune and fate because everything is simply from Allah.

The next section places women's vignettes into the plurality of hidden agency as Islamic. The ten Muslim women who were willing to share their experiences with us during our respective anthropological fieldwork are Sasak and Bimanese women who live in Lombok. They range in age from 20 to 64 years and come from mixed backgrounds including rural, urban, and city areas. Some have higher educational backgrounds than others. Some live near or in their husband's natal homes in orthodox communities, while the majority live in city or urban spaces away from kin ties. Many of these women were aware of what they were experiencing and had finances and employment and persisted in their marriages where they experienced domestic violence in the form of physical and sexual abuse, betrayal, economic abuse, and psychological abuse. These women demonstrate the exercise of hidden agency as explicitly Islamic in their worlds between violence and piety.

Many of these women were known to us both from previous research projects and the wider communities in which we respectively live/d. Our methodologies were based in daily life interactions in several neighbourhoods and consisted of informal interviews, general discussions, and observations between 2017 and 2020.

Hidden Islamic agency as Sufi: turning to Allah

Here, we seek to build an argument for the notion of a hidden Islamic agency as Sufi, which itself is plural and diverse in its practice as we demonstrate shortly. This understanding can partially be located in Sufi notions of contraction and expansion that explain how every circumstance is from Allah, whether good or harmful, and that when the seeker knows this, s/he will no longer view the harmful ones as difficult or dangerous, but will only see Allah's blessings and thus will move closer to the experience of annihilation or unity with the Creator. As we explore, some of our informants appear to be striving for this understanding of the hardships they face, yet their lived realities indicate that they continue to negotiate and bargain with multiple discursive spaces including those from the state, local culture, and

orthodox Islamic ones—all of which continually shape their constructions of domestic violence.

Sufism, which is generally understood to be the mystical dimension of Islam, in practice is about turning oneself to face only Allah under the guidance of a Sufi Murshid (teacher) in a Sufi order. Sufi teachings in Indonesia are deeply integrated into daily life through a long history of Islamization (beginning in the thirteenth century) and the strong presence of Sufi orders attached to traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). In villages and city and urban neighbourhoods, women and men attend weekly *pengajian* (religious sermons) as communal social practice, and depending on the male preacher, they may be exposed to Sufi teachings. The women we discuss here can be placed in a Sufi context because they have access to Sufi teachings through attending religious sermons and consulting with Sufi teachers or preachers, rather than being aspiring Sufis in a traditional Sufi order (*tariqa*).

Keeping the above broader theoretical considerations in mind, here, we seek to further locate the notion of an Islamic agency in wider feminist scholarship. Saba Mahmood's (2005) seminal work on docile agency deserves attention at this point for it shows us how to interrogate patriarchy and women's piety in a way that challenges ethnocentric claims to what freedom constitutes from a feminist perspective. Scholars have opened up new ways of interpreting Mahmood's work, such as that of Weir (2013), who argues for different conceptions of freedom to predominant and assumptive feminist ones, and that striving for it can be seen as a sense of belonging even when it is embedded in piety movements that seek to control it. It is this flavour which also flows through our arguments, and this is what takes us into "hidden agency" with which we engage here because through the women's private or hidden *dhikr*, Quranic recitation, and prayer practices, they strive towards lessening their suffering and bringing a kind of freedom in the form of emotional relief, which we elaborate on shortly and identify across three levels.

Our arguments may be also generally situated in Saba Mahmood's work on docile agency in the sense that the hiddenness may be misperceived as docile or conformative when viewed as fate that cannot be changed. To the contrary, we want to show that these women persist through their agency to be close to Allah and this can make them feel active in their efforts to address the domestic violence and strive for relief. We suggest that women actively work towards lessening their suffering by employing a spiritual approach and that they exercise kinds of agency in an Islamic way that is bound by their connection with Allah and their use of *dhikr*, Quranic recitation, and prayer. Our use of the term agency is therefore a nuanced one that is multidimensional and flexible in that it can expand and contract in different circumstances and is at the same time concerned with one's embeddedness in Allah's Divinity.

This understanding of agency contrasts with normative sociological and feminist ones that see agency as a human's capacity to act in response to social structures and power relations without necessarily allocating a dimension for an understanding rooted in Divinity. We propose a new perspective by showing how when agency appears to "stop" or is limited by a social or structural contraction, women see that a new door opens in a spiritual way by utilising Islamic spiritual methods such as

dhikr to reach a stronger connection with Allah. This in turn endows them with a kind of divine agency directly from Allah that enables them to endure any hardship they may experience.

Hayati et al. (2013) describe an "elastic band strategy" which refers to the dynamics of strategic coping for Javanese women who experience domestic violence. This strategy is built from the theory of coping between engagement and disparity proposed by Moos (1995) and Tobin et al. (1989). Similar to our research here, Landman and Mudimeli (2022) highlight South African women's spiritual approach to cope with violence in intimate relationships hoping that divine intervention will remove evil spirits from husbands and families. These findings may also be placed together with those from Waldrop and Resick (2004) that show how women are more likely to have multiple coping strategies in abusive relationships and they choose to use strategies that are appropriate to certain situations.

We identify three major reasons why women turn to Allah and thus demonstrate plural practices for hidden agency. These are (1) fear of being shamed by the community; (2) taking self-responsibility in line with Islamic teachings that a woman is the source and solution to domestic violence; and (3) turning to Allah because there is nowhere else to turn other than to the Creator. Parallel to drawing on theoretical considerations for understanding hidden Islamic agency and how it intersects with limiting/ed social structures and discourses, we provide vignettes to illustrate how women feel cornered to be with Allah in their abusive marriages.

The first category is "fear of being shamed," and its consequences demonstrate how women feel they have limited or no choice in their confrontations with socio-cultural discourses on shaming divorced women. Smith's fieldwork in West and East Lombok where living quarters are extremely dense reveals how neighbours are exposed to each others' business. Sometimes neighbouring family members may intervene in a physically violent situation, while non-family neighbours may not do so. Usually, if a woman is suffering from physical abuse, her family will take action to redress the matter but it does come at the cost of bringing shame to her family.

The five women we place in this category are Rabia, Zahiya, Yanti, Kiki, and Amira. All of these women experience/d domestic violence in various forms (physical, economic, psychological, and sexual) related to their husbands' sexual infidelity and/or polygamy and are unwilling to seek divorce. What is common to these women's experiences is the fear of acquiring the status of a divorced woman and the associated shaming which they do not want put on their children or parents if they were to file for divorce. Further to this, these women worry about surviving alone without a father figure for their children, and even if they were to remarry, they worry about attracting another violent partner.

Rabia and Zahiya are neighbours who live in an orthodox rural community with several Tuan Guru households in East Lombok. Life is structured communally around the mosque in a very dense neighbourhood where women meet every Thursday night for communal Sufi *dhikr* in the Tuan Guru's homes. Domestic violence in these women's lives is normalized, but not necessarily accepted. When it does occur in the form of physical violence, like what Rabia experienced, it is a public event and brings great shame to the victim. Rabia explained that her husband (recently deceased) was the brother of a powerful Tuan Guru who lives in the same

neighbourhood. Rabia is his first wife. When he took a second wife and built a house for her at the back of their home, he started beating her hard with a belt on a regular basis if she expressed pain at him for taking a second wife. While neighbours could hear the beatings, at the time they happened, nobody helped her for fear of insulting and shaming the Tuan Guru's family. Only after a year did her family, who lives nearby, eventually take action by instructing her husband to stop the violence or they would remove Rabia from the house. Rabia wrapped herself in *dhikr* and prayer for a way out by calling on deceased Sufi saints for help, rather than divorce, and says she now has relief since her husband has passed away, but is wary of re-marriage.

Zahiya lived a few houses up from Rabia and also experienced physical violence throughout her marriage (she recently passed away due to illness). Her husband used to openly flirt with a neighbour, and when she would complain about it, he would aggressively hit her in the mouth. Zahiya's husband divorced her early on in their marriage because he wanted another woman, but the couple remarried shortly afterwards for the children's sake. Zahiya also suffered great emotional violence and was subjected to regular name-calling, which is also a normalized form of domestic abuse in this particular Sasak community. Abusive Sasak language directed at wives from husbands such as *acong* (dog) and *bawi* (pig) is used often in family homes and in public spaces. Having already previously been divorced from her husband, Zahiya expressed how she would only bring shame to herself and her children if she pursued another divorce. Zahiya's adult children who lived nearby would intervene by threatening to kick their father out of the house if he did not stop his violence and flirting, demonstrating how family-kin use strategies for assisting women victims. Zahiya used *dhikr* formula she learned from the Tuan Guru to treat her emotional wounding, yet unfortunately, up until her death, her husband did not change his behaviour.

In Mataram, Yanti (a school teacher), Kiki (a tailor), and Amira (a civil servant) experience ongoing emotional manipulation from their husbands in response to domestic abuse as a result of extramarital affairs and polygamy. Yanti found out from a security guard that her husband had another house with a secret second wife. One day, Yanti waited in front of the house and was so shocked to find her husband there. After confronting him, her husband began emotionally manipulating her by reminding her not to bring further shame to her family through divorce like her two sisters who are both single parents. She said if it were not for her children, she may have considered suicide and continously strives to find the "the delicacy of faith behind this tragedy." Kiki's and Amira's husbands, like Yanti's, also do not believe that having extramarital affairs is a form of violence. The women explained that their husbands believe that by engaging in affairs they are fulfilling part of a process of polygamy which is justified in Islam. Yanti, Kiki, and Amira live in reasonably well-off housing estates patrilocally, not far from their husbands' relatives. The women lead busy lives away from their natal homes and kin and feel isolated in their suffering.

Kiki's husband started spending the family income on a widow with whom he became obsessed. Kiki explained that she does not consider divorce to be possible because it would shame her extended family and bring deep pain to her mother. She keeps her husband's affair a secret and struggles to treat her emotional wounding

through prayer and getting closer to Allah. She fasts Mondays and Thursdays and performs Sunnah deeds to strengthen her heart. Kiki said that she feels calmer as a result while her husband shows no love for her or their three children. Kiki named her practices as "a ritual escape" which, according to her, enriches her spiritual life. She believes that this is a temporary trial in order to get extraordinary happiness in the future. Kiki said, "the Prophets and Sufi masters went through a lot of trials, so my trials, according to my *ustadz* (male Muslim teacher) are a test for me reach a higher degree."

A similar problem is also experienced by Amira who is married to her maternal cousin. Amira's husband, who is a policeman, often has affairs and does not provide a decent living for Amira and her only child. Many times, their families have assisted in mediation but her husband remains unchanged. Amira does not want a divorce because of the great shame it would bring, and she does not want her daughter to grow up without a father figure. She also makes every effort to hide her husband's behaviour from her child. The only thing that strengthens her is to continue getting closer to Allah through *dhikr* and prayer. By doing so, Amira feels she is a good, pious role model for her child.

These factors combined are what drive these women to turn to Allah in response to fears of being culturally shamed by the wider community. These women believe that by turning over their problems to Allah and by practising *dhikr* and prayer, their pain will eventually subside. In their practice of hidden agency, these women appear to accept their situation and could be described as docile in their survival, and yet core to these women's practices in attempts to manage their feelings and emotions in response to domestic violence through *dhikr* and prayer is the way they draw on suffering faced by Sufis and Prophets as a way to legitimize their experiences. This guides them to actively work towards reconciliation with what they experience without an end in sight. Women work towards enhancing their piety by accepting their fraught marriages as fate and try to reconcile their suffering through the practice of *dhikr*. These women do not necessarily feel ease but rather are in a continual cycle of striving for it and feel trapped by the fate of being paired with the wrong partner.

Wardatun's research in wealthy housing estates in the city of Mataram reveals how middle- and upper-class women in self-owned businesses with financial independence also persist in domestic violence and shows how women in these urban spaces are less likely to actively intervene in each other's lives. Farah and Faizah can be placed in the second category related directly to self-responsibility and Islamic teachings about a woman's patience as key to re-establishing family harmony. In Islam, *sabar* (patience) is always coupled with *ikhlas* (sincerity). *Sabar* is accepting what happens in life and *ikhlas* is believing that what happens in life is God's decision, especially when faced with a situation that seems to have no way out. *Sabar* and *ikhlas* when paired together carry deeper meanings linked to subsistence in one's situation whether good or bad (a kind of endurance or persistence). These when understood from a Sufi perspective give rise to meanings about accepting one's fate and fortune, as we described earlier.

Farah, an online designer fashion shop owner, started Quranic recitation classes with her teacher Faizah, a Quranic teacher, who, like her, also experiences domestic

violence due to her husband's sexual infidelity. Farah, in particular, blamed herself for her husband's infidelity after she was diagnosed with post-natal depression and actively sought counselling with her husband to repair their marriage. Her efforts failed and her husband's attention kept turning to other women. Some neighbours explained how they have witnessed these women's husbands hitting the women in public, and others can hear verbal abuse. They explained they did not interfere for it is not their business, and they assumed the women love their husbands.

By engaging the Islamic notion of *sabar* and the socio-cultural understanding that family harmony is a woman's responsibility, Farah and Faizah explained that they have no desire to divorce and instead turn their efforts to increasing their piety through Quranic recitation and *dhikr*. They said they believe that by doing so they have enhanced their fortunes in life by generating economic independence with enhanced income, together with productive, intelligent, and successful children. They utilize their piety as a way to enhance their lives while turning away from focusing on their husbands. Resultantly, they feel that they receive blessings through the trials their husbands give them, and so they willingly accept such trials as part of their fate. These women engage both fortune and fate on the continuum of plural agency that we outlined earlier.

The third category is probably the one that fits closest to Sufi pursuits for annihilation in Allah and is supported by the enhanced status as *belian* (Sasak healers) these women acquired as they drew in proximity to Allah through their constant surrender and *dhikr.* Sasak *belian* may be male or female traditional shamanic healers, but more generally, the term refers to female midwives who occupy a central role in Sasak society. The three *belian* we examine below each experienced ongoing sexual betrayal from their husbands, along with associated emotional, psychological, and physical violence. They describe themselves as having hit rock bottom when they turned their hearts over to Allah. They explained how they were impoverished, in pain, and traumatized and had nowhere else to go except to their Creator where they would vent and cry out for help. They each tell a different story about hardship, but they share the same success as Muslim women with acquired *belian* status in their urban neighbourhoods. These women see fortune and fate as the same in their spiritual practice of turning to face Allah only. This is clearly a Sufi perspective, yet, as we will see, the women are still constrained by their situations, and yet feel that they have found relief through their piety.

Ummi Khairiyyah describes her impoverishment due to her husband's excessive infidelity as a blessing and how her catalyst came from sleeping with her children in the neighbourhood mosque and engaging in constant prayer and *dhikr*. Her neighbours would bring them food and offer emotional support. One day, a pregnant neighbour was in the mosque telling Ummi Khairiyyah about her breach pregnancy and the doctor's plans to operate. Ummi Khairiyyah suddenly felt the urge to stroke the woman's pregnant belly while reciting Quranic verses and speaking to the baby. She assured the woman that her baby had turned to the correct position. The next day, the doctor confirmed that the baby had indeed turned, and this marked the beginning of Ummi Khairiyyah's new status as a *belian* midwife in her community which earns her enough income to survive. She believes that her persistent practice of *dhikr* created space for her to focus on her own talents and to disengage her

husband's behaviour and she claims that she is now at ease with her husband because she has turned to only Allah. Her husband still has affairs with other women and does not bring any income into the household, but she claims she has no more inner constriction regarding his abuse since finding her way to Allah.

Similarly, Ummi Misnah also became a *belian* after reciting Quranic verses during her own pregnancy. She attributes her midwife status to the violence she suffered from her husband who impoverished and abused her through his polygamous exploits with other women. Unlike Ummi Khairiyyah who now lives at ease with her husband, Ummi Misnah returned to her natal home for a short time, where she was able to earn a good income through her work as a *belian* for pregnant women and babies who seek healing and blessings from her. Her dedication to turning over her pain to Allah resulted in her living separately from her husband, but not divorcing him. Eventually she returned to live with her husband because she could not cope with the shame and social pressure she faced as a single mother. Misnah's case is slightly different from Ummi Khairiyyah's because she exercised a temporal form of agency by returning to her natal home and yet the social pressure was more unbearable than her former world of abuse. She said that it was when she re-joined her husband that she was able to surrender and turn over her pain to Allah and find some relief in this practice.

Our final example tells the story of Mushlilah who suffered great physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence throughout her marriage. She was completely cornered and could not see a way out. In her deepest prayers to Allah, she explained that she totally surrendered herself asking for a way out of her horror, "either in divorce or death." Shortly after her deep surrender, she claims she received a *dhikr* and Quranic recitation in a dream. After 2 months of intensive practice exactly as shown in the dream, she said her husband changed. Shortly after this, Mushlilah realized she had acquired an ability to heal people. Her story is public and she is widely known as a spiritual healer and teacher. She claims that those she heals inform their friends, and one by one, they seek her help, and with success, they manage to find peace in their hearts just as she and her husband did. Her husband said that during his wife's process of transforming, he realized he must stop the violence or it would never end; he did not want to teach his children to be violent and so he found the willpower within to bring about this change.

We see that initially these women's motivations were not purely Sufi ones rooted in a conscious desire for annihilation in Allah, and so we cannot claim that these women are consciously choosing a Sufi path in the way of traditional tariqa under the guidance of a Sufi leader. They are, however, drawing on Sufi notions of striving for proximity with the Creator and in doing so seek to alleviate any pain they feel from their husbands' violence, and indeed, the women in our third category claim that they have done so. Mushlilah's case is exemplary because of claims that her husband was able to stop his abusive behaviour. This kind of example, in Sasak Muslim society, is understood as one where Allah has intervened and answered Mushlilah's prayers and subsequently gifted her with a spiritual status as a healer. It is this kind of story and its outcome that other women strive to achieve in their piety and spiritual practices while facing ongoing abuse in a male-dominated society that normalizes domestic violence. Clearly, the normalization of domestic

violence against the women examined here entraps them structurally, physically, and emotionally, cornering them into performing hidden agency to lessen their suffering. Our informants' narratives show how Sasak culture, coupled with Islamic discourses that teach that a wife belongs to her husband, normalizes violence against women in Lombok without efforts for redress for male perpetrators.

Conclusion

This article has presented new ways of theorizing agency in an Islamic context, and particularly a Sufi one, concerning what we have called "hidden agency" that engages a direct relationship with the Creator, Allah. We have drawn on feminist theorizations of agency as plural, temporal, distributive, and limiting/ed to explain the socio-cultural and structural contexts that intersect to either support or deter women from removing themselves from marriages with domestic violence. Further to this, we have shown how agency can expand and contract in different spaces, times, and contexts and that when women interpret that it stops either through fear or through Islamic gender norms that normalize violence as a woman's responsibility to solve, or simply because a woman has gone into survival and feels cornered, women turn to Islamic spirituality in a Sufi way to express hidden agency in Divinity.

While these arguments and practices are most certainly not limited to Lombok, we have also shown how gender and domestic violence in Lombok can be located in a Sufi framework that women engage in their understandings about fortune and fate and other teachings they have access to from male teachers and preachers. The idea that women can move between fortune and fate in Lombok's contested discursive social landscapes again reflects the expansiveness and contractiveness of agency in social structures that are limiting/ed, and, beyond this, into a Divinity that also has the power to contract and expand.

The hidden agency exercised by these women occurs in a context dominated by male authorities and Tuan Guru religious leaders who spread particular ideas about husband-and-wife relations. These gender discourses are grounded by unequal power relations that unjustly give men reasons to inflict violence in all its forms on their wives. In response to such normalization of unequal power relations in marital relationships, the women examined here demonstrate how they use Sufi and wider Islamic practices as tools for relieving their suffering. Women's narratives indicate that they practice enhancing piety in a hidden mediation with domestic violence, while their husbands generally do not seek to change. A pluralized approach to understanding women's agency is therefore necessary in order to move forward in efforts to support women who engage religious methods as coping strategies.

The findings of this study suggest the need for more female and male religious authorities to socialize understandings about domestic violence from a human rights approach in communities in partnership with the state and non-government organizations. The state also needs to strengthen interventions against perpetrators

with positive outcomes for victims by providing more assistance for victims in order to change the wider culture of violence against women.

Author contribution Both authors contributed to data collection, writing, and analysis.

Atun Wardatun focused on the literature review and collected ethnographic data from urban neighbourhoods in Mataram and from government and non-government organizations.

Bianca J. Smith developed and focused on the theoretical framework and analyses. Her ethnographic data are from urban neighbourhoods in West Lombok and regional village communities in East Lombok.

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Declarations

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