WOMEN'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN BRUNEI

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ABSTRACT

Community plays a significant role in helping to mitigate the issue of domestic violence, particularly in terms of providing support for victims. This extends to the work of advocacy and civic engagement, particularly those involving women. In Brunei, support for victims of violence against women (VAW) has long been consigned to state institutions and legal procedures. This paper highlights the emergence of women-led non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advocacy groups dealing with the subject of VAW, focusing on domestic violence. Such groups have provided a safe space for victims to come forward and seek support, advice, and shelter, in the face of fear and immense hesitation. We argue that such spaces are forged as an empowering environment for victims to regain their sense of agency and self, informed by local knowledge and story circles of fellow women sharing their own lived experiences. Women facing social stigma, shame, fear of being judged, logistical challenges, and spousal pushback, have rendered many victims psychologically crippled from forwarding their cases and seeking official help. Thus, state institutions become the last resort when it has already become too late for some victims. We present as case studies, the analysis of two active advocacy groups, in facing the challenges of their work with victims. We demonstrate key findings thematically linked to the perceived notion of protection and preservation of victims' privacy, and fear of 'outing' their perpetrators (often, their spouse), for fear of backlash, shame, and even ruining their future. This is particularly salient in the context of Brunei being a small country, where 'everyone knows everyone else', and where Malay familial relations continue to serve as the bedrock of a conservative Islamic society. Refusal to lodge official reports and instead choosing to go to their closest relatives or NGOs as the first line of help, indicate a need to further understand victims' attitudes and behaviour, so a more customised approach to victim support can be made. Further compounding the issue is the existence of social stigma that influences decisions to seek help. We suggest ways to strengthen informal support mechanisms that guarantee privacy, providing victims and their children with safe, empowering environments.

Keywords: *Civic Engagement; Domestic Violence, Informal Support, Social Stigma, VAW, Advocacy, Brunei.*

INTRODUCTION

Community plays a significant role in helping to mitigate the issue of domestic violence, particularly in terms of providing support for victims. This is mainly because frequently they have become the first-line source of support the victims confide in (Belknap et. al, 2009; Bashir & Tariq, 2017; Irogue, 2020) This extends to the work of advocacy and civic engagement, particularly those involving women. Women's movement can bring a great contribution to changes and reform when it comes to women's welfare and protection not just nationally but as well as internationally (Roure, 2009; Irogue, 2020). Women can offer unique forms of support to other women, including advocating for their needs and raising awareness for necessary reforms in legal cases, particularly those involving intimate issues such as domestic violence (Roure, 2009).

Domestic violence is a crime that can happen to anyone regardless of gender, social status, and age. UN Women (2022) reported that there are approximately 736 million women who become victims of domestic violence globally. The repercussions of abuse are very dangerous and linked to the possibility of life-threatening consequences, and even fatality. This justifies why the responsibility for domestic violence support should not just lie on the shoulders of formal institutions. Society and the community also play their roles in helping the victims or stopping the cycle of abuse. Instead of solely dependent on the hard strategy, the need to strengthen the soft strategy should also be emphasised in giving an enabling environment for victims to have a safe space to find solace and help to assist their situation.

However, violence against women is perpetuated by unequal power relations, an internal manifestation of power relations that are embedded and accepted in the local community and society which creates social stigmas (Michau et. al, 2014). Consequently, the existence of social stigma surrounding domestic violence can threaten the safe space for the victims to seek help and the responses from state actors (Mukerji et. al, 2023). Women's Civic Engagement can play a significant role in confronting the issue at hand by addressing prevalent challenges and fortifying neighbourhood solidarity. This proactive involvement not only fosters a sense of collective responsibility but also enhances social cohesion within communities (Dang et al., 2021). Consequently, it contributes to the cultivation of strong social networks within neighbourhoods, thereby fostering a conducive environment for addressing the complexities of domestic violence (*ibid.*).

In Brunei, support for victims of violence against women (VAW) has long been consigned to state institutions and legal procedures. However, over the years, Brunei has seen an increase in women-led organisations that have been advocating not only this issue but any issues in any gender-related matters. This paper highlights the emergence of women-led non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advocacy groups dealing with the subject of VAW, focusing on domestic violence. Such groups have provided a safe space for victims to come forward and seek support, advice, and shelter, in the face of fear and immense hesitation and how these non-government-affiliated organisations can help with the prevention of domestic violence.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Women's Civic Engagement and Advocacy

The concept of civic engagement has been defined as *"the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future"* (Adler and Goggin, 2005; Ko et al., 2021). Civic engagement is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond mere participation and involvement. It is a psychological process that relates to individuals' opinions and values, motivating them to take action on social issues that matter to them. As Aslin & Brown (2004) note, civic engagement is not just about showing up and going through the motions; it is about being fully engaged and committed to creating meaningful change. Barrett (2014) similarly emphasises the importance of capturing people's attention and drawing them into the civic sphere, where they can become active and engaged citizens who work together to address the challenges facing their communities and the world, giving a sense of support and safe space.

As it focuses on the issue that has been going on in the heart of the community, civic engagement has the potential to influence not only changes on the community level but also at the institutional level. With this definition, it can be said that women's civic engagement looks into how women are participating in advocating and engaging with the community and institutions on issues that are affecting the community. Therefore, women's civic engagement is mostly tied to collaboration with the community as their primary target for social change. One of the targeted groups of the community consists of informal social networks also known as informal support that consists of family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, society, and community leaders (Benard, 2007; Shepard & Zelli, 2008).

According to Azmi et. al. (2020), there are two methods of civic engagement nowadays: online civic engagement that takes place in virtual space (social media and technologies) and traditional methods that take place in the physical space. The most common methods of women's civic engagement are hosting awareness and educational talks concerning issues that they are advocating. This is initially done at the community level in an attempt to educate the community on the topic of concern. Shepard & Zelli (2008) emphasized the importance of community mobilisation strategies where the community is the first target in the primary prevention of domestic violence. The intervention can give awareness to the community on the importance of changing social norms.

Social stigma of domestic violence is normalised and spread through the interactions of society which can affect the ways in which an individual perceives domestic violence and their thought process in giving support to the victims. One of the targeted groups of the community consists of informal social networks also known as informal support (Benard, 2007; Shepard & Zelli, 2008). Family, friends, neighbours, co-workers and other civic, religious, and community are what consist of informal social networks (Shepard & Zelli, 2008). As part of the social ecosystem, these groups of assets are important for prevention and hence why this study highlights women's engagement in advocating the issue of domestic violence and how it has given victims a safe space to seek support amidst the social stigma (about domestic violence) that still to some extent controls the society.

Women Civic Engagement and Advocacy in Brunei

In order to understand the women's civic engagement and advocacy in Brunei, there is a need to discuss and understand the socio-cultural and political nature of Brunei Darussalam. Brunei has a unique socio-cultural dynamic. The country adopts the *Melayu, Islam, Beraja* (MIB, or Malay Islamic Monarchy) national philosophy, which also acts as a national identity, forming the bedrock of the socio-cultural landscape of the community. Since MIB has such a profound impact on Bruneians and has deeper cultural repercussions on individual personalities and social conduct, it is evident that culture serves as the backdrop for all aspects of the nation (Kumpoh et al., 2017). As part of the culture, maintaining face is crucial and thus, many members of the community make every effort to avoid situations or circumstances that can jeopardise one's family reputation and traditional values. Therefore, there is some sort of adherence to familial values, which means that any engagement in precarious activities including premarital pregnancy, drug use, alcoholism, and gambling issues must be aptly avoided in order to not embarrass the family (*ibid.*). Even though domestic violence is considered a crime and is no longer hidden behind the mask of family privacy, in reality, reporting domestic abuse to the formal authorities imperils interpersonal harmony and puts the family's reputation at risk (Kamit, 2015; Kumpoh et al., 2017). Additionally, most victims are reluctant to disclose domestic violence cases because of the prevalent culture of stigma and silence in Brunei (Kamit, 2015). This highlights the importance of familial relationships and how it is deeply rooted in the Bruneian culture and way of life, in order to preserve the sanctity of the family, its image, and privacy.

The activities of women's civic engagement in Brunei can be tied to the rise of women's advocacies and women's movements. The surge of the women's empowerment movement in Brunei Darussalam has increased in the past years. They have been visible with their agendas of spreading gender awareness, educating people on women's issues and their empowerment movement in the country (Ahmad et al., 2023). Their attempts to educate and spread awareness to the general public are evident on their social media where they have constantly been promoting their advocacy and public engagement activities. One of the phenomena that has been actively advocated for years in Brunei is violence against women (VAW). Violence against women is a gender-based crime that consists of several types of violence perpetrated against women. However, this study will focus on advocacy for domestic

violence victims in Brunei as the case study with two chosen most active women advocates who have been actively advocating on this issue. This will be discussed further under the Methodology section.

Domestic Violence in Brunei

In Brunei Darussalam, the victims of domestic violence are mostly women - or so it appears, according to reported cases received by the Royal Brunei Police Force (See Table 1). Though male domestic violence victims are rare, they do exist and many such cases are underreported. The statistics compiled and received by the Women and Children Investigation Unit from the Royal Brunei Police Force show that every year from 2017 until 2022, Brunei has hundreds of women victims. The year 2022 saw a decrease in the number of women victims, going from 126 in 2021 to 114. While this is a positive development, the fact that over a hundred women were still victimized remains a concern. Additionally, the significant disparity between the number of female victims and those of other groups is a worrying trend. It must also be noted that according to the head of the Women and Children Investigation Unit, these numbers do not include unreported and retracted cases - in which the victims change their minds for some reason.

Table 1: Statistics of domestic violence in Brunei, 2017-2022. Source: Women and Children Investigation Unit, Royal Brunei Police Force.

OFFENCE		YEARS					
		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Dharar Syarie (Domestic Violence)	WIFE	151	167	159	164	126	113
	HUSBAND	7	9	15	8	8	7
	EX-WIFE/HUSBAND	3	5	2	5	4	5
	FAMILY	28	21	36	10	34	34

The high number of cases and women victims in the following table indicates two points worth noting: First, formal court procedures and processes of bringing justice to victims are often lengthy and time-consuming. Domestic violence cases cannot be solved in a matter of days. This has repercussions concerning the service delivery and efficiency of institutions to handle such cases, while at the same time providing support and monitoring victims and perpetrators. Secondly, the high number of cases reported means victims are quite aware of the seriousness of these cases, albeit valuing the privacy of their families. While community support and women's empowerment movements through advocacy have increased in visibility over the past decade, certain questions remain which become the main research questions for this study and are discussed in the **Research Questions** section later on.

Legal Framework

Brunei practices a dual legal system—Civil court and Syariah court—the legal frameworks for domestic violence exist accordingly. Likewise, domestic violence crimes fall under the jurisdiction of the Islamic Family Law, the Married Women Act, the Penal Code 2010, and the Girls and Young Person Protection Act. Prior to 2001, the well-being of married women in Brunei was only protected under the Married Women Act of 1999. This Act protects the welfare of married women and includes laws regarding the rights and obligations of a husband and wife, the maintenance of wives, and the attachment of earnings in cases applied (Haji Kamaludin, 2017). However, the limitation to this where protection of women against domestic violence was lacking led to the provisions of the Penal Code and the enaction of Islamic Family Law in 2001 as well as the Married Women Act in 2010. Generally, the Islamic Family Law is implemented in order to assist any matter on Islamic concerns within the Muslim family in Brunei. Any convictions and legal matters to assist non-Muslims in the country will fall under the jurisdiction of the Married Women Act. These laws and acts give relevant authorities the power to enforce certain actions upon domestic violence cases, victims, and perpetrators.

The institutions that are also given the responsibility to handle the issue of domestic violence are as such:

1) Community Development Department, Ministry of Culture, Youth & Sports.

2) Women and Children Abuse Investigation Unit, Royal Brunei Police Force.

3) Medical Social Workers, Ministry of Health.

4) Family Counselling Service, Ministry of Religious Affairs.

5) Islamic Religious Council of Brunei, Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Some of the help and support being offered by these institutions are government-sponsored shelters where victims will be placed temporarily while waiting for their cases to be heard, counselling for husband and wife, and financial support for the victims amongst others. These institutions have been entrusted legally to aid, protect, and give support to the victims of domestic violence under Islamic Family Law. The government also work closely with women advocates and non-government organisations (NGOs), especially in spreading awareness and educating the public on matters about women's rights issues (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Research Problem

As stated by Kamit (2015), the mitigation of domestic violence in Brunei has been hindered by a significant obstacle that is deeply ingrained in our society - social stigma. When this is allowed to continuously happen, it can lead to victim blaming, silencing of victims, and normalisation of violence not just in a household but also within society which can lead to even more problematic issues (Michau et. al, 2014). This intangible force has become so pervasive that it has shaped our cultural beliefs and perceptions over time. Given that the community often serves as the first line of defence and support for those affected by domestic violence, social stigma and cultural beliefs play a crucial role in shaping how people perceive and respond to this issue. Therefore, overcoming social stigma and changing cultural beliefs is key to making progress in addressing domestic violence. Hence, it is worth examining the valuable role and significance of women's civic engagement and advocacy in driving social change, as they tend to focus on critical issues that affect society and the community.

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this research is: how can women advocates and civic engagement play a role in helping to mitigate the rise of domestic violence cases?

To further explore this question, the following questions are asked:

1. What does the women's civic engagement and advocacy look like in Brunei?

2. How have they helped in engaging the community in spreading awareness about domestic violence? In what ways do they help to meet the needs of victims?

3. Why is it important to understand the importance of women's civic engagement and advocacy in the issue of domestic violence?

4. What remain as challenges and barriers in tackling this issue?

Research Aim and Objective

The main aim of this study is **to highlight the roles and importance of women's civic engagement and advocacy within the community as an effective method of domestic violence prevention, in the context of a small country like Brunei**. Although the effort to eradicate the suffering of the abuse aftermath should not be gendered, however, the scope of this article is limited to women's engagement with the general public. This is in tandem with the surge of women's empowerment movements and the rise in advocacy groups in Brunei Darussalam, evident in recent years. They have been visible with their own agendas of spreading gender awareness, educating people on women's issues and their empowerment movement in the country (Ahmad et al., 2023). Their attempts to educate and spread awareness to the general public are evident on their social media where they are highly visible, and have constantly been promoting their advocacy and public engagement activities.

To achieve the aim, the objectives of this study are as such:

(1) To investigate how informal support such as women's advocates and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide support to the victims of domestic violence

(2) To understand the challenges for these advocates and organisations in dealing with domestic violence victims and community engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. As this research dives into the first-hand experiences of participants in their advocacy and empowerment programme and their personal involvement in communicating with society and victims, the type of questions asked were rather generic than specific and posed as guide questions throughout the interview. This was in order to give the participant more room and freedom to share their experiences. Other than that, Observations have been made on the social media (Instagram) profiles of both participants. The study has taken into consideration the content shared on their respective accounts which are relevant to the research questions. Additionally, any engagements with the audience have also been closely observed to gather relevant insights for the study.

In addition to conducting interviews, desk research was utilised to collect secondary data for literature findings. Various databases, including *Google Search, PUBMED, Researchgates,* and *Google Scholar,* were searched using titles, abstracts, and keywords. The keywords searched included "Civic Engagement," "Women's Civic Engagement," "Domestic Violence Advocacy," "Domestic Violence in Brunei," and "Women's Civic Engagement in Brunei."

Thematic analysis has been conducted on the collected data, with a thorough examination of the interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns. The results have been presented in two distinct sections: the initial section delves into the advocacy efforts of women in Brunei against domestic violence, while the subsequent section brings to light the obstacles and limitations they encounter during their endeavours.

Study Sample

This article presents the findings from two case studies centred on the advocative works of two selected participants, whom were selected via purposeful sampling. Under purposeful sampling, participants are specifically identified and selected on the basis that these participants are known to have deep knowledge and are well-experienced in the subject matter (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2013). The two selected participants for this research are two individuals who have been actively spreading awareness and hosting activities on two different women's issues. The details of the women's advocative works are as follows (Table 2):

Table 2: Summary information on research participants and their advocacy work.

Name/Case	Founder	Aim	Target Audience
"Project Women and Girls Brunei"	Nur Judy Abdullah	A not-for-profit social enterprise committed to raising awareness on safeguarding the rights and promoting the responsibilities of girls and women in their development journey and transformation. To develop, maintain, and nurture partnerships with institutions, organisations, networks, and individuals who identify with their visions and missions.	Women and young girls in general; with focus on Women of Indigenous heritage, Migrants, and women with disabilities
"Single Mama Speaks BN"	Sarinah	To inspire, to give strength and support single mothers in Brunei.	Mostly (but not limited to) single mothers, and women in general.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Numerous studies have been done in relation to domestic violence and its plausible risk factors, reasons, theories, and prevention strategies. The studies have proven the numerous efforts, despite there being more room for improvement, done by governments in an attempt to bring justice and give support to victims of domestic violence. However, domestic violence cases are still prevalent. Evidently so, in Brunei, as discussed beforehand and will be discussed again in Section 3, the stigma and social perceptions of being domestic violence victims and suffering from the aftermath of the abuse (such as being a divorcee or a widow) have proven to have a great influence on victims' decision to seek help. Moreover, ever since the increase in women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Brunei that have been advocating on women's issues, it is rather interesting to see the behaviour of the victims in approaching them first to seek support or a sense of safety. Their decision to approach informal support first as opposed to the government should be understood in order to give more effective space and support to the victims. Additionally, these NGOs have also had a complementary role for the government, acting as a helping hand to educate and spread awareness to the community in regard to the prevalence and effect of domestic violence and women's rights.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

WOMEN'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY IN BRUNEI

Women's civic engagement in Brunei is generally demonstrated within two common public spaces: through virtual (online) advocacy, and through 'normal' and traditional means of face-to-face and group interactions. However, both participants utilise more traditional means of engagement and only use their social media to advertise and inform of their off-screen activities for a wider reach. Through the findings, the roles and importance of women's civic engagement and advocacies in Brunei can be categorised into the following: (1) Peer Support Network, (2) Community Awareness and Education, (3) Empowerment Programmes and; (4) Challenging Social Norms.

Peer Support Network

Based on the analysis of their social media activity, it appears that Sarinah predominantly engages in soft advocacy and traditional methods of engagement. Her approach involves participating in and organising talks, forums, and educational events that are frequently conducted in collaboration with non-governmental organisations or government entities. Sarinah would often conduct more intimate and smaller gatherings or meetings in *cafés* with women and victims who seek her for advice and guidance. She would also often be invited to give talks in forums that engage with topics concerning the experiences of single mothers, violence against women, and women's empowerment. Her experiences and early years with the work of advocacy were built upon her struggles as a victim of domestic abuse that eventually led to her divorce from her then-husband and due to this, she decided to create her platform—physically and virtually—to provide some sense of belonging and safe space for other women victims. Connecting with peer support networks can be a valuable resource for victims, providing a space to exchange coping strategies, discuss trauma management, and share information about available resources (Gregory et al., 2021). Sarinah also notes that sharing information within a community has provided a profound sense of comfort and belonging, as it assures the victims that they are not alone in their struggles. This can serve as a source of hope and inspiration for those who may be facing similar challenges. She states that:

"...group support is very important and having to have somebody that goes through the same things like us is very important mainly because...without you even realising, hearing all those stories can help us recover..."

Most victims are looking for moral support and through this support network, they find solace in the fact that others have faced similar challenges and have successfully emerged from them. The act of sharing information extends beyond a mere exchange of data but rather serves as a testament to the strength of human connection and support, just like what Barrett (2014) stated. Sarinah's experience is truly remarkable, especially considering that she is both the advocate and the survivor, particularly when viewed in the context of Brunei's conservative and closely-knit society.

Community Awareness and Education
Similarly, Nur Judy also opted more for soft advocacy and traditional methods. Her organisation focuses on a grassroots level with more hands-on educational and informational activities. In the interview, she stated that as of now, the organisation is targeting community-based activities especially those in remote areas and minorities in Brunei. The minorities here are referred to as indigenous women, migrant women, and women with disabilities by Nur Judy. According to her these groups of women are often "overlooked" by organisations and she and her organisations feel the need to provide awareness and education about domestic violence to these communities. Some of the activities they have held include educating them on the provisions of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) in layman's terms. On this, Nur Judy states:

"During the engagement with the community, we raise the awareness on CEDAW…. certain provisions like…prevention of violence against women or we call it VAWG—Violence Against Women and Girls... [we] engaged women and girls in dialogue where they will know their right and response that protect themselves from violence and highlight the various ways on how to access justice when cases of violence arise within the community."

Amongst other things, Nur Judy and her organisation have utilised online technologies in giving community awareness and education. She states that in 2022, they conducted an online legal webinar series:

"…and we have legally speaking webinar series which is free webinar series on legal matters that affect women and girls…women and girls legal advice clinic, we have that. We provide legal advice on all sorts of violence for women and girls and it's being done online."

This legal webinar involves cooperation from lawyers both from the government and non-government legal sectors. This legal webinar aims to educate women on their legal rights.

"…in women's legal advice clinic, we have helped a woman to make an informed decision to the advice they get from our lawyers. The keyword there is informed decision. We helped them make a decision based on the parameters wherein they can fully maximise their rights according to what law requires." – Nur Judy

According to Nur Judy, their organisation has provided valuable assistance to numerous victims of domestic violence who are often not knowledgeable about laws, regulations, and legal provisions that apply to their situation. These individuals often face financial constraints that exacerbate the problem, leaving them without access to legal advice. Through these webinars, victims gain the knowledge and information to make informed decisions about their cases. The organisation's efforts provide a vital service that empowers these individuals to take control of their lives.

To some extent, during these community awareness and education events, they would encounter victims whose condition are at its worst and in dire need of further help. Thus, they have gone above and beyond to assist these victims in obtaining the help they require, connecting them with relevant legal services and other resources.

"But if we think that the person needs more help more than legal advice, we will refer it to other specialists maybe a psychologist…counselling… So there are experts doing that so we will channel them to the right assistant." – Nur Judy.

Overall, the organisation's work has been a significant step towards creating a safer and more just society. Their commitment to spreading awareness and educating the community has given the community knowledge about this issue, preparing them to be equitable as the first responders of informal support for domestic violence victims. According to Irogue (2020), this is crucial in giving the victims an enabling environment to seek support. Their efforts have provided a much-needed lifeline to victims of domestic violence and have helped to raise awareness about their rights in this pressing issue.

Empowerment Programmes
Programmes focused on women's civic engagement and advocacy are designed to empower survivors of domestic violence. These initiatives provide a safe and supportive space for individuals to regain control of their lives, access resources for safety and recovery, challenge harmful gender stereotypes, and ultimately break free from the cycle of abuse.

Nur Judy and her organisation have taken a significant stride in this direction by developing an empowerment programme for women. The programme strives to support women in attaining financial independence by equipping them with the essential skills and knowledge to generate income from alternative sources. Through this programme, women can explore various ways to earn money to enhance their financial stability. In regards to this, she states:

"Project-wise is more on women in social entrepreneurship or WISE. So, the livelihood programme… promote employment opportunities in the social enterprise sector…[and] focuses on promoting women and technology and promote the use of digital technology in pursuing online careers for small business start-ups."

Additionally, they have offered financial literacy courses. In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation collaborated with the regional organization ASEAN to provide support and financial training to women.

"We used the grant [from the ASEAN fellowship] to purchase sewing machines for them [victims and women] and raw materials as well as for capacity building such as financial literacy [class]…[where] we have financial experts who conducted training for the victims." – Nur Judy.

According to Nur Judy, this is one of the most important things to empower women with. Educating and engaging them in a financial dialogue is the first step toward financial independence.

On the other hand, Sarinah's method of empowerment is mainly centralised around consultation and sharing sessions either through a smaller support group or one-to-one sessions with victims and women.

"We have created a few support groups that concentrated in domestic violence and one on one basis of consultation with clients where they opened up about their domestic violence…[we] explore the things we need to do when it [abuse] occurs."

This phenomenon arises from the predicament faced by Sarinah when subjected to abuse by her husband, wherein she grapples with a profound sense of disorientation and isolation. Such circumstances compelled her to endure in silence, fearing the potential repercussions on her family's societal standing. Consequently, the establishment of consultation platforms and group support mechanisms has afforded Sarinah and fellow victims an invaluable opportunity for intimate engagement and participation in awareness sessions, thereby fostering a conducive environment for empowerment and healing.

Challenging Social Norms
The current technological innovations have produced a virtual space that poses as the extension of physical space. Thus, virtual space holds a prominent role in engaging with the community. Sarinah started to build her platform for *Singlemamaspeaks* on Instagram after realising how utilising social media is one of the powerful tactics in reaching audiences. She started as a survivor of domestic violence who was looking for a different outlet for what she was going through at that moment and the serendipity of online advert led her to an event hosted by one of the women's movements in Brunei at that time, *win.bn.* According to her, coming across the advert directed her to an event that opened more doors to meet people with whom she had common ground. This advantage has proven to be a game-changer for women's advocates and movements in Brunei, who have leveraged it to raise awareness about their cause.

Sarinah, while primarily interacting with the community through conventional methods, showcases her off-screen endeavours with victims of domestic violence through a multitude of posts and photos on her social media platform. Additionally, she has also been seen posting inspirational photos and posts that sparked conversation surrounding the social norms in Brunei. By also intentionally acknowledging herself as a victim on social media, she has become a pioneer for victim advocacy in the broader public sphere. Amongst the positive responses are as follows:

Anonymous 1:
*"@f*****: Your story: MashAllah what an incredible woman you are. Unfortunately the social stigma of divorce remains. And women are always blamed for not being a good enough wife, not being attractive enough etc. It starts to change when strong women like you speak up. It's also Allah's test for you - He will not burden you with more than you can bear and InshaAllah He will reward you in the most beautiful way. Amin."*

Anonymous 2:
*"@bru*******: What you're teaching your kids by taking them away from the violence and negativity is that it is not right. It is not right. If you (or any single mamas out there with a similar story) had stayed, the kids would think and learn that that is 'normal'. You deserve better and they too deserve better. Kids learn from our actions and by standing up for yourself and taking yourself away from something that is making you unhappy (h*** even harming you), they will mirror these actions too inshaAllah."*

From there, it can be seen that Sarinah's platform is a powerful and inspiring resource for single mothers who are struggling to leave abusive relationships for the well-being of their children. Through her page, Sarina has been able to reach out to numerous women facing similar challenges and has created a safe and supportive community where they can share their experiences, learn from one another, and grow together. As a result of this engagement, more and more women are connecting with the platform and contributing to the conversation, offering insights, and exchanging knowledge that can challenge prevailing norms. The comments by those anonymous have fostered conversation around the stigma of seeking help and leaving an abusive relationship that has always stopped victims from seeking help. These kinds of conversations are not just beneficial for the victims themselves but also for every audience that will come across her public account and engage in this conversation. The utilisation of social media can provide online information about the issue, spread the news and inform people across geographical boundaries (Azmi et. al, 2020). On the other hand, Nur Judy's attempt at challenging social norms can be seen through activities, education, and awareness through community mobilisation with community and community leaders. As previously mentioned, her organisations are active in carrying out grassroots-level activities—especially in remote areas where technological advances and access to social media are limited—in an attempt to educate and inform people about the right information about domestic violence.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Psychological Complexity

The intimate relationship between perpetrators and victims is different from that of victims of public violence (Hart, 1993; Ganley, 2008). Given that domestic violence frequently occurs within the confines of the home and is perpetrated by individuals who are typically perceived as sources of safety and trust by victims, the latter often find themselves in a state of denial. Such victims struggle to accept the reality that someone they deeply love and trust could inflict harm upon them. Worse, some victims do not even acknowledge the abuse and deem it as part of marital relationships. Consequently, an attachment to their perpetrators may lead victims to rationalise the abuse as acts of love or misguided attempts to impart lessons. This phenomenon, as explained by Ganley (2008), underscores how victims' judgment becomes clouded, impeding their willingness to seek assistance and hindering their progression towards recovery. Nur Judy recounted encountering this scenario during an awareness programme conducted by her team in remote regions. When questioned about the awareness levels among victims regarding their abuse, Nur Judy noted a lack of awareness, particularly concerning other forms of violence.

"Neglect is a form of violence…when you neglect economically, financially, emotionally, all that is a form of violence and not many [victims] know that. So, when we do raise awareness, we talk about neglect. They [would] say, 'really?' Because they thought violence is just physical. Emotional and mental violence is not something that they are aware of. It is not fully defined. To them, violence is always physical with bruises. Even then, most of the victims think it is still normal and that is hard for them to understand that it is not normal."

On the contrary, for victims who possess a keen awareness of the abuse inflicted upon them, some choose to extend forgiveness to their perpetrators, nurturing the belief that through repeated chances and the passage of time, transformative change may occur in the perpetrators. About this aspect, Nur Judy articulated:

"...they [the victims] go through that cycle where they get abused and then the abuser will woo them back with promises of not hurting them again, professing their love to the victims, and over and over again, the victims will always forgive the abuser, believing that they can fix the abuser. But at the end of the day, they still ended up becoming a battered wife."

Therefore, it is important to foster awareness regarding the issue and spread important information to all members of the community, particularly those residing in remote areas who may encounter obstacles in accessing aid. Due to the psychological complexities where victims have an emotional bond with the perpetrators, victims of abuse may experience difficulties in recognising the abuse they endure which silences the victims. Consequently, the silence may perpetuate the vicious cycle of violence. Dispensing individuals with the appropriate knowledge and comprehension of acceptable conduct is pivotal in establishing a more secure and healthier society and civic engagement and advocacy are instrumental in this process.

Social Stigma

The challenges and barriers in dealing with the victims mainly stem from the social stigma attached to being a divorcee. Most victims have this mindset that the official report of the abuse may lead to divorce. To them, bearing the title divorcee or widow is negative due to the social stigma surrounding the two statuses and this can be proven from the comments by Anonymous 1 and Anonymous 2 above from one of Sarina's Instagram posts. This further proves the point made by Kamit (2014). The fear around the status of being a divorcee and widow often leads to victims refusing to lodge official reports or lack of support from their surroundings to do so. Nur Judy shared her experience of encountering a victim in this position. She said:

"And the people around the victim will discourage her from opening this kind of can of worms because not to taint the family name because Brunei is a very small country, everybody knows everybody."

Another social stigma that still controls the society in this country is the fact that the blame for divorce will always be the responsibility of women to bear but rarely the men; the ***victim-blaming***. The people surrounding them would oftentimes encourage women to be patient with the kids and when women fail to, the blame would be theirs. In one of her Instagram posts, Sarina shared her own experience being under this spotlight:

"Our society still doesn't really accept it. On the general level, it is becoming more acceptable but unfortunately on a personal level, especially for a woman, it still creates a haunting picture for many. One thing[is] for sure, my parents didn't accept it. Not so conservative, although pious, the act seems to attract a lot of shame. My mother became resentful of her own daughter. She kept blaming me for the divorce. For the broken marriage. Coming up with so many [excuses, like:] 'Maybe you didn't...'; 'Maybe you didn't work hard enough to save it... or 'Just face it [alone/in private]'; 'Think about the kids'... They say 'kesian'(pity), but never to you, the mother. Only to the kids"

The social illness of victim-blaming does not just happen to single mothers but to every victim too. Victim blaming should be avoided by any means as this will have a psychological impact on the victims and can hold them back from reporting the abuse.

Lack of Knowledge of Abuse and Domestic Violence

The lack of knowledge of what is considered abuse has also been seen as one of the major barriers to getting women to come forward. They were not well aware that abuse can be inclusive of verbal, emotional, mental, and even financial. Thus, the lack of awareness on this hindered the victims from lodging reports to the responsible institutions. Victims who especially grew up in a household where abuse is a normal occurrence in their everyday life would never see it as a crime especially abuse that is latent such as emotional, verbal, mental, and financial. Some of them do not know how to prevent the cycle of abuse from happening

continuously (Kamit, 2015). This can be supported by the statement made by Nur Judy regarding most of the abuse victims she encountered:

"They don't know that they can file a report, they don't know how and they are scared of the confidentiality and the trust in the system…they are also scared that the perpetrator or the abuser will know about it."

Furthermore, some victims and the community have limited knowledge of the legal rights of the victims and the repercussions of the options they have. The limited knowledge of legal rights can lead to confusion and this poses a challenge. Therefore, it can be seen why investing in engaging the community as an attempt to educate them on all matters pertaining to domestic violence should be taken into serious consideration. Informal support i.e., the community and close relatives are oftentimes the first line of support that victims go to. Therefore, having an informed and well-educated community and society is imperative in order to give them a safe space to confide in.

"It takes someone to tell them that, hey, you are being abused." – Nur Judy.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper illustrates women's civic engagement and advocacy in Brunei, which leans towards soft advocacy, taking place both in online places and in the traditional way, which is physical space. These advocates have made significant strides in raising awareness about the issue of domestic violence and educating the community on how to identify and respond to it. They have also established peer support networks and challenged societal norms that perpetuate violence against women.

One of the contributions of these advocates is the creation of safe spaces for victims to share their experiences and receive support from their peers. These safe spaces provide a non-judgmental and supportive environment where victims can speak openly about their experiences without fear of being stigmatised or re-victimised. Moreover, the emergence of social media has had a favourable impact on engaging with society in virtual spaces, providing a wider reach. Through their (the women's advocates and organisations) visibility on social media, many people have found the courage to speak out and share their personal experiences without fear. Social media has given them the benefit of using pseudonyms and sharing limited personal information and has allowed them to share their stories while safeguarding their privacy and that of their abuser and families. As a result, this has fostered a secure and constructive environment for individuals to find solace and information.

Additionally, these advocates have worked tirelessly to mobilise the community, ensuring that everyone is well-equipped to recognise and respond to domestic violence in the right manner. This includes educating children, who are often overlooked in these conversations, community and community leaders. Furthermore, these advocates have provided vital support to the government in addressing domestic violence such as capacity-building programs, spreading awareness and sharing educational information, and providing legal clinics for victims. These efforts have empowered victims to make informed decisions and take control of their lives. By providing these services, advocates have also helped to reduce the burden on government agencies that provide support to victims of domestic violence.

Despite the significant progress made in addressing domestic violence, it is essential to recognise that there is still much work to be done in challenging societal norms that perpetuate violence against women. Evidently, the social stigma in Brunei is still apparent and still influences the perception of domestic violence by the society and victims which influences the decision to seek help. One of the hardest barriers is the psychological complexities of domestic violence. The intimate relationship between perpetrator and victim has blurred the line between marital responsibilities and abuse causing most victims to normalise the violence. The lack of depth awareness of the intricacies of domestic violence, the existence of support services, and legal rights have also been proven to be a challenge.

From the findings, this paper concludes that Bruneian women's civic engagement and advocacy plays a critical complementary role to the government in mitigating the social issue hand-in-hand. Their participation can provide valuable insights for policy development, enhance community outreach and engagement, promote accountability and transparency, and ultimately improve service delivery. Moreover, governments can benefit from the expertise, networks, and resources of women's civic organizations to address social challenges and cultivate more inclusive and responsive societies. In order to achieve common goals and priorities towards positive social change, cooperation between governments and women's civic groups is crucial, especially when dealing with issues such as domestic violence, which are frequently concealed and overlooked. Therefore, the task for future research should focus on how to further strengthen the informal support surrounding the victims to give them an enabling environment for them to share their abuse experiences and how can the government play a part in achieving this, especially through policy implications. As Brunei Darussalam adapts the Whole-of-Nation approach, this can be a topic worth diving into for future research.

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