



## From Sunshine to Midnight Rain: The Dynamics of Abusive Romantic Relationships among Women Victims

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#### ABSTRACT

*Dating violence is a form of gender-based violence that frequently occurs within romantic relationships. This study aims to examine the understanding of dating violence from the victims' perspectives. It also seeks to identify the types of violence experienced and the responses of victims in the Surakarta region and surrounding areas. This research adopts a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that victims possess a relatively good understanding of dating violence. However, this understanding does not necessarily empower them to break free from the cycle of violence. The violence experienced by victims is categorized into two types: non-physical and physical violence. Non-physical violence includes possessiveness, restriction of freedom, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, and economic abuse. Physical violence consists of physical assault and sexual violence. Not all victims reported experiencing extreme forms of abuse, such as physical or sexual violence. However, all participants experienced some form of non-physical violence. Several factors were identified as contributing to victims' decisions to remain in abusive relationships, including emotional attachment (love), dependency, and family-related reasons.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Violence remains a prevalent social issue in Indonesia. One form of violence based on personal relationships is dating violence (Kekerasan dalam Pacaran, or KDP). This type of violence is also categorized as gender-based violence (GBV), which explains why women are often the primary victims. According to the 2023 Annual Report (CATAHU 2023), gender-based violence in the personal sphere accounted for the highest number of cases involving women, totaling 282,741 incidents. Dating violence alone reached 360 reported cases, with both

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victims and perpetrators primarily being students and university attendees. The highest cases occurred in West Java, Central Java, and East Java (Komisi Perempuan, 2024). Data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak) indicate that Central Java Province reported 526 cases of violence involving individuals in romantic or close relationships (SIMFONI-PPA, 2024). In the city of Surakarta and surrounding areas, a total of 75 violence cases were recorded, six of which were identified as dating violence (Dania, 2024).

Dating is no longer universally understood as a relationship grounded in mutual love, respect, and protection. Love, which was once associated with affection and tranquility, has increasingly become a boomerang that consumes emotional well-being and induces psychological pressure (Simanjuntak, 2021). The essence of dating, to sharing love, nurturing one another, and mutual appreciation, has gradually eroded, transforming into a toxic relationship marked by violence. Women often fail to recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship, as feelings of love toward their partner cloud their perception. Consequently, dating violence is frequently perceived as a trivial issue and, in some cases, even mistaken for an expression of affection (Siahaan et al., 2023).

Numerous studies have explored the issue of dating violence from various perspectives. Holistically, research by (Dubu et al., 2020); (Wahid & Legino, 2023); (Mas'udah et al., 2023); and (Pratama, 2024) highlights that dating violence often arises from the perception of victims as weak, which reflects the dominance of power relations and patriarchal culture. Other studies, such as those by Arisandi et al. (2023), Ramadhatsani et al. (2024), and Azaria & Aliza (2024), examine the various forms of dating violence and their impacts on student victims at both secondary and tertiary education levels. These studies describe multiple types of violence, including verbal abuse (e.g., name-calling and insults), psychological abuse (e.g., possessiveness, manipulation, gaslighting), physical abuse (e.g., slapping and pinching), and sexual violence (e.g., coercion to kiss or engage in sexual activity).

This present study aims to examine the lived experiences of dating violence victims from three categories: students, university students, and workers in the Surakarta area. Additionally, it seeks to investigate the victims' level of understanding of dating violence as a foundation for analyzing their responses to abusive experiences.

## METHODS

This research is a qualitative study employing a phenomenological approach. Qualitative methods explore human or social issues through specific approaches, such as phenomenology, to generate naturalistic and factual reports based on the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sampling technique used was snowball sampling, with the criterion that key informants must know and consider the participants to have experienced a toxic relationship. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data on the informants' experiences. The data were analysed using Spradley's data analysis model, which includes four stages: domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and cultural theme analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Informants' Background Information

The informants in this study are individuals who have experienced dating violence and reside in the Surakarta area and its surroundings. The demographic data of the informants are presented in the table below.

Name	Age	Status
CH	20	University student
NA	20	University student
AM	21	University student
AP	22	University student
FA	22	University student
AD	22	University student
MUT	19	University student
TA	20	University student
BA	23	University student
ZA	24	Nurse
RA	22	Store employee
BE	23	Factory employee
MU	18	High school student
AL	17	High school student
EC	18	High school student

### 2. The Nature of Dating Violence from the Victims' Perspective

Dating violence is a form of abusive behavior, both physical and non-physical, within romantic relationships. According to Murray, dating violence begins with non-physical attacks that gradually escalate to physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse (Murray, 2009). Dating violence can also manifest in social violence, economic violence, and spiritual violence (Krug et al., 2002). Victims' understanding of dating violence was assessed after they reviewed video content and infographics from Instagram accounts such as @mubadalah.id, @gemilangsehat\_org, @spekhamsurakarta, and @wwcmawarbalqis. The findings indicated that toxic relationships, possessiveness, and controlling behaviors were the primary concerns when victims reflected on dating violence. A toxic relationship is characterized by mutual hatred, anger, and frustration toward a partner (Zahiduzzaman, 2015). These toxic dynamics create opportunities for violence due to power imbalances between men and women (PUKAPS Interview, 2025). Possessiveness is an extreme form of jealousy that compels the perpetrator (partner) always to know the victim's whereabouts and activities. What should be a symbol of love has shifted into a negative trait that makes the victim uncomfortable (Deslandes et al., 2024).

Controlling behavior is a method used by perpetrators to reduce jealousy by leveraging power dynamics. This behavior can limit social interaction and activities with family or close friends (Engel, 2023). Victims also demonstrated a good understanding of the various forms of dating violence as outlined by Murray and Krug, including physical violence, psychological violence, verbal abuse, sexual violence, and economic violence. This

understanding is influenced by the advancement of technology and the role of socialization through local NGOs in Surakarta, such as SPEKHAM (Solidaritas Perempuan untuk Kemanusiaan dan Hak Asasi Manusia) and PUKAPS (Pusat Kajian Perempuan Solo). These NGOs focused on gender issues play a crucial role as a knowledge hub for the community to raise awareness about violence against women and provide a safe space for victims of violence (Elvira & Putra, 2023).

### 3. Victims' Experiences of Dating Violence

The romantic relationships experienced by victims quickly turn into a disaster filled with fear after two months to two years of being together. The dynamics of the relationship become unhealthy due to small arguments that gradually escalate into violence. This finding contrasts with previous research, which indicated that dating relationships lasting over a year do not necessarily lead to fatal violence (Kanal & Manoppo, 2024). The study describes the onset of violence as being marked by the perpetrator's possessiveness, where the victim is expected to send messages or visual proof at all times and share their current location so the perpetrator can monitor where and with whom the victim is. This finding is supported by earlier research that showed perpetrators demanding victims to update them via text messages or phone calls when the victims were spending time with family or friends (Sari & Wahyuning, 2025). Acute possessiveness opens the door for perpetrators to impose boundaries on the victim's personal life. Forms of control include limiting communication, micromanaging, and involving physical or sexual violence (Fontes, 2015). The findings of this study explain that the constraints victims experience include prohibitions on contacting or messaging people of the opposite sex, social restrictions from friends and family, limitations on pursuing hobbies, forced sharing of Instagram accounts, and commenting on clothing choices. Other studies emphasize that controlling behavior constitutes psychological violence, as perpetrators restrict the victim's social space both online and offline (Alifiani & Khodijah, 2023).

Victims also face verbal abuse, including derogatory terms such as *bodoh*, *goblok*, *jancok*, *tolol*, *gatel*, *lonte*, *asu*, *bajingan*, and are sometimes accompanied by threats. Verbal violence that belittles, shouts, and harshly criticizes indicates the perpetrator's growing apathy (Oluseyi et al., 2025). Perpetrators become easily agitated and use derogatory language towards the victim. Other studies confirm that victims frequently endure verbal abuse, including harmful labels (e.g., *perempuan lanjrik*, *si asu*), harsh words (e.g., *bacot*, *asu*, *anjing*), and threats (Astriani & Satiningsih, 2021). Psychological or emotional violence is a combination of possessiveness, controlling behavior, and verbal abuse. This type of violence is a step beyond verbal abuse, as it focuses on control, demands, intimidation, and demeaning the victim (Engel, 2023). The study findings reveal that victims experience psychological violence in the form of accusations of infidelity, manipulation, gaslighting, and the silent treatment. Such actions make the victim feel worthless, creating doubt and self-blame. Other findings indicate that psychological violence aims to diminish the partner's self-worth through actions of belittling, demeaning, and intimidating the victim (Pranoto & Masrurroh, 2021). This non-physical violence represents the initial phase of the violence cycle described by Walker. The first phase, the tension-building phase, depicts the perpetrator's behavior becoming erratic, using harsh words, and worsening interactions between the couple (Walker, 2017). The victim attempts to offer affection, improve the situation, and avoid responding to the perpetrator's

behavior in hopes of resolving the issue. As a result, the victim becomes hyper-aware and fearful of offending the perpetrator when communicating (Saraswati et al., 2024). This phase generates significant tension within the relationship, even though the victim may not realize they are already enduring non-physical violence.

Perpetrators begin to exploit the victim's financial resources within the context of their romantic relationship. Economic violence refers to the material exploitation of one party through manipulative tactics. It involves actions by the perpetrator to control, seek opportunities, dominate, and destroy the victim's possessions, with money being used as a weapon (Lisette & Kraus, 2000). This study reveals that economic violence is reflected in the perpetrator's use of the victim's money for various reasons, such as for personal needs or business capital. This exploitation also includes requests for the victim to provide food delivery services, borrow personal items, and damage them without compensation, spend joint savings for wedding expenses, and even use the victim's name for online loans. Previous studies reinforce these findings, showing that perpetrators will use any means, including exploiting the victim's financial resources, just for their pleasure (Wahyuni et al., 2020). The violence escalates as the emotional bond between the victim and the perpetrator deepens. Physical violence serves as evidence that the relationship is unhealthy, especially since the perpetrator has already been confirmed to have a history of verbal and sexual violence (Murray, 2009). The findings of this study state that physical violence eventually haunts the relationship, manifesting as slaps, punches, grips, hair pulling, pinches, kicks, choking, and forceful confiscation of the victim's belongings. This violence is visible, directly felt, and sometimes leaves marks on the victim's body. Previous studies reinforce that physical violence, including scratches, punches, kicks, and the use of sharp objects, is experienced by women during dating (Hatu et al., 2024) and (Surya et al., 2024).

The final form of violence experienced by victims is sexual violence. This type of violence involves the forced fulfillment of sexual desires. The object of sexual violence is the victim's body and reproductive parts through forced touching, rape, sexual exploitation, and sexual torture (Rahmi & Siregar, 2020). Sexual violence is also reflected in sexually explicit comments and lewd stares. The findings of this study indicate that three victims (university students and workers) experienced sexual violence during their relationships. The forms of sexual violence include forced touching, kissing, and sexual intercourse. This study contributes additional evidence in line with previous research, showing that victims of sexual violence in dating relationships have been forced into contact, kissing, watching adult content, having sex, being prohibited from using protection during intercourse, and even coerced into abortion ; (Mas'udah et al., 2023); and (Alifiani & Khodijah, 2023). Further findings reveal that sexual violence also occurs online through forced video call sex and sharing explicit visuals (Meiksin et al., 2024). The various patterns of violence outlined thus open the potential for the next stage of the violence cycle, known as the acute battering phase. This stage depicts the perpetrator's cruelty through psychological, physical, and sexual aggression (Walker, 2017). This study differs slightly in that not all victims faced physical and sexual assaults, but did experience serious psychological violence. Such violence includes extreme possessiveness and control, which affect the victim's daily routine, accusations, and economic abuse. Some victims encounter similar treatment, which may include physical and sexual violence as described earlier. Physical and sexual violence represent the peak of the fatal

assault meant to instill fear in the victim, making them reluctant to end the relationship (Sholikhah & Masykur, 2020).

This broken relationship, however, does not compel the victim to retaliate or leave the perpetrator. This finding contradicts the victims' earlier understanding of the nature of violence, as discussed previously. The field data reveals that victims tend to be passive when experiencing violence. Victims can only cry, submit, remain silent, and comply with the perpetrator's wishes in the hope that the situation will improve. This finding is consistent with previous studies that describe the passive response of victims, such as crying and apologizing, when the perpetrator unleashes their aggression (Ola et al., 2023). The victim's passivity signals a sense of powerlessness in finding a solution to the suffering they endure (Ananda & Hamidah, 2019). The perpetrator, with their power, becomes the winner, as the victim accepts all of their mistreatment. This situation represents the victim's acceptance that the perpetrator is a strong figure capable of controlling them (Pratiwi, 2020). On the other hand, some victims show courage in confronting the perpetrator, as an effort to defend their right to be treated with respect as a woman. When faced with aggression, victims often do not stay silent and choose to respond as forcefully as possible (Walker, 2017). This study illustrates that some victims resist the perpetrator by arguing the truth, as they are not guilty. Victims also fearlessly retaliate against the perpetrator's aggressive actions with the same physical violence. There is still courage among these women to make decisions and fight against everything that deviates from what is right. This study supports previous findings that state that victims attempt to face and retaliate against the perpetrator's actions when their relationship is unstable (Oldac et al., 2025).

The increasingly chaotic relationship eventually leads the perpetrator to recognize their actions, resulting in a decision to reconcile. Tension and violence decrease, accompanied by the perpetrator's regret. This situation represents the final phase in the cycle of violence, known as the reconciliation phase (honeymoon phase). The perpetrator atones for their mistakes by apologizing, offering affection and meaningful gifts, and promising not to repeat the offense (Walker, 2017). Most perpetrators express their apologies directly and through the offering of gifts. Some perpetrators, however, do not explicitly apologize, yet the relationship improves as it was before. Victims generally have high tolerance and gentle feelings, forgive the perpetrator, and continue the relationship. This finding aligns with previous studies that show victims are often trapped by manipulative traps and thus easily forgive the perpetrator for their mistreatment (Prameswari & Nurchayati, 2021). The reconciliation phase can essentially serve as an affirmation for the victims who choose to remain in the relationship (Sangeetha et al., 2022). The bitter reality becomes evident after this phase, as the victim repeats the same mistakes and actions as before, potentially with even more severe consequences. The victim will experience the same violence if their level of awareness is low (Saraswati et al., 2024). The victims experience tension once more, and the cycle of violence starts over, ranging from the usual cycle to the extreme one involving physical and sexual violence.

It is essential to highlight once again that a solid understanding of the nature of violence in romantic relationships does not deter the victims from ending the toxic relationship. A clash between logic and emotion occurs because the victims remain in a dysfunctional "home" (Maharani & Valentina, 2023). Victims choose to stay in the dangerous circle with the perpetrator for several reasons. First, deep feelings of love lead to a false hope

that the perpetrator will improve and their romantic relationship will blossom again. The victim becomes a positive thinker, believing the perpetrator's love is still worth preserving because of their good traits (Ayu et al., 2024). Second, the long duration of the relationship creates emotional attachment. Almost all victims have been in the relationship for one to five years, making it seem a waste to end it. Another study presents similar findings, suggesting that the length of the relationship with the perpetrator influences the victim's emotions, causing them to continue the relationship (Hatu et al., 2024). The victims stated that this dependency arose from the perpetrator's possessiveness and control, which ultimately made them unable to rely on themselves. Another impact is that the victim fears loneliness and fears not being loved by another man if they decide to end the toxic relationship. Third, the relationship between the two parties' families. The victims and perpetrators know each other's families, which creates a seemingly friendly communication dynamic. This makes the victims reconsider ending their relationship with the perpetrator. The victims carry the added burden of intense family ties, so they strive to maintain the toxic relationship (Qonitah et al., 2024). The victim becomes a people pleaser, not wanting to disappoint their own family or the perpetrator's family.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, victims of dating violence experience various forms of abuse, ranging from non-physical to physical violence. Victims endure high levels of possessiveness and control, psychological abuse, verbal abuse, economic abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence. Not all victims experience physical violence, but all victims indeed suffer from non-physical abuse. The cycle of violence contributes significantly to the findings of this study. Women, as the subjects of this cycle, find it difficult to break free from the cruelty of the perpetrator. It is an interesting finding that despite having a good understanding of the nature of abuse, victims may remain in harmful situations, whether they respond actively or passively. Emotional factors, such as deep love, dependency, and family ties, are among the reasons why victims remain trapped in these toxic relationships.

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