

Reconstructing the *Ṣāliḥah* Wife: Gendered Exchange, Religious Authority, and Divorce among Working Muslim Women in Indonesia

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|| Received: 17-06-2025 | Revised: 13-12-2025 || Accepted: 06-02-2026

Abstract: This study critically examines how dominant constructions of the *ṣāliḥah* (pious) wife, centered on obedience to the husband as a prerequisite for marital harmony, paradoxically generate gender injustice within contemporary Muslim families—particularly among working wives. Rather than producing harmony, such interpretations frequently result in discrimination, double burden, multiple forms of domestic violence, and marital dissolution. This condition underscores the urgency of reassessing the concept of marital obedience in light of contemporary social realities in which both husbands and wives participate in paid work and public life. Focusing on divorced working women, this descriptive qualitative study draws on in-depth interviews with eight female participants who experienced marital breakdown following prolonged structural inequality. The data were analyzed using Social Exchange Theory to examine the balance between costs and rewards within marital relationships. The findings demonstrate that marital instability emerges when wives continuously bear domestic, emotional, and economic responsibilities without reciprocal recognition, support, or shared accountability from their spouses. In such conditions, obedience is transformed from an ethical value into a mechanism of domination that legitimizes unequal power relations. This study argues that marital harmony cannot be sustained through unilateral obedience or rigid gender stereotypes, but instead requires reciprocal exchange, deliberation (*musyawarah*), and cooperation between spouses across all domains of family life. These findings support the need to reinterpret marital obligations within Islamic family law and state marriage regulations toward a reciprocity-based framework that explicitly recognizes shared economic responsibility and protects working wives from structural discrimination.

Keywords: Divorce; Gender Inequality; Islamic Family Law; Marital Obedience; Social Exchange Theory; Working Wives

Introduction

In Islamic normative discourse, the concept of the *ṣāliḥah* wife represents an idealized model of femininity and marital virtue. A *ṣāliḥah* woman is commonly described as possessing moral worth before God, the Prophet, and society, and as the primary foundation for marital harmony and continuity. Islamic literature frequently positions the *ṣāliḥah* wife as the best provision for a woman after piety (*taqwā*), and as a determinant of household stability and happiness (Malik & Ummah, 2021; Syarifah et al., 2025). This ideal, however, is predominantly articulated through a framework that emphasizes obedience (*tā'ah*) to the husband as the wife's core marital obligation. Obedience is normatively manifested through domestic service, restrictions on mobility without the husband's permission, and the categorization of disobedience as *nusyūz* (Alawi, 2019; Apriyanti & Hasanah, 2025; Hariati, 2021; Jayusman et al., 2020).

While this construction has historically been justified as a means to secure family harmony, it has become increasingly contested in contemporary contexts characterized by women's active participation in public and economic spheres (Rasheed, 2025; Saiin et al., 2024). In practice, wives' engagement in paid work is often conditional upon the husband's consent and framed as secondary to their domestic responsibilities. Women's labor outside the home is typically interpreted as auxiliary support to the husband's obligation of financial provision rather than as an equal contribution within a reciprocal marital partnership (Gussevi, 2020; Nada, 2022). Such interpretations reinforce asymmetrical power relations, particularly when obedience is demanded without a corresponding reconfiguration of husbands' responsibilities.

Empirical studies indicate that these asymmetries frequently generate adverse consequences for working wives. Women often experience a double burden, combining unpaid domestic labor with paid employment, while remaining subject to normative expectations of obedience. In many cases, husbands gradually abdicate their obligation of maintenance, resulting in discriminatory practices that shift economic responsibility onto wives. These conditions are closely associated with psychological, sexual, and physical violence, as well as neglect and infidelity, all of which erode marital stability (Hatun & Fidan, 2024; Manna et al., 2021; Nelli et al., 2023). Rather than fostering harmony, obedience-based marital norms may thus intensify vulnerability and conflict within households where women work.

This contradiction is clearly reflected in divorce patterns at the Religious Court of Pekanbaru. Court records from 2018 to 2020 show that wife-initiated divorce (*cerai gugat*) consistently outnumbered husband-initiated divorce (*cerai talak*). In 2018, there were 424 *cerai talak* cases compared to 1,236 *cerai gugat* cases; in 2019, 461 versus 1,412; and in 2020, 457 versus 1,323 cases (Pekanbaru Religious Court Documents, 2020–2022). Across these years, *cerai gugat* accounted for more than twice the number of *cerai talak* cases. Significantly, approximately 85% of *cerai gugat* cases involved working wives. Previous studies attribute this trend primarily to husbands' limited understanding of marital obligations, particularly regarding financial responsibility and equitable role distribution (Nelli et al., 2023; Nelli & Lubis, 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2024).

Existing scholarship on women's employment and family life can be grouped into four broad strands. The first highlights women's paid work as a means of enhancing family welfare and marital harmony, focusing on patterns of rights and obligations within households (Asnah, 2018; Djawas et al., 2021; Hoffman & Averett, 2021; Kessler, 2020; Nada, 2022; Tuwu, 2018; Zunaidi & Maghfiroh, 2021). The second examines the motivations for wives' employment and its dual impacts, identifying economic resilience and social mobility as positive outcomes while noting role conflict, reduced communication, and marital tension as potential negative effects (Alfiah et al., 2020; Discua Cruz et al., 2022; Hermaleni, 2018; Islahi & Azid, 2020; Junaidy et al., 2025; Rasidin et al., 2020; Rohmania, 2021; Suharnanik, 2019). The third strand focuses on violence experienced by working wives, emphasizing that economic participation does not necessarily translate into empowerment when patriarchal marital norms remain intact (Ahram, 2019; Junaidi & Hidayah, 2017; Nabillah, 2021; Nelli et al., 2023; Sheikhbardsiri et al., 2020; Wiasti & Arjani, 2021). The fourth strand links women's employment and education to rising divorce rates, with some studies suggesting a positive correlation between higher female education and marital dissolution (Abubakar, 2020; Heaton et al., 2001; Radliyah, 2012).

Despite the breadth of this literature, a critical gap remains. Most studies treat women's employment or education as explanatory variables while leaving the normative construction of the *ṣāliḥah* wife—particularly the obligation of obedience—largely unexamined. This tendency risks misattributing marital breakdown to women's socio-economic advancement rather than to the persistence of unilateral obedience norms that are increasingly incompatible with dual-income family structures. Consequently, the normative ideal of the *ṣāliḥah* wife remains insulated from critical scrutiny, even as it continues to shape marital expectations and legal reasoning.

This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between obedience-based constructions of the *ṣāliḥah* wife and the prevalence of wife-initiated divorce among working women (Bukido, Azzochrah, et al., 2025). Rather than framing women's employment as the source of marital instability, this research argues that tensions arise from the disjunction between classical obedience norms and

contemporary realities of shared economic participation. The study seeks to reconstruct the concept of the *ṣāliḥah* wife within an Islamic family law framework that emphasizes reciprocity, justice, and balanced responsibility as prerequisites for marital harmony.

The urgency of this research lies in its implications for both academic discourse and normative practice. Existing approaches to marital conflict and divorce often remain gender-biased, placing disproportionate responsibility on women to sustain marriages despite structural inequities (Afif et al., 2022; Herdiyanti, 2018; Wagianto, 2021). By critically re-evaluating the concept of the *ṣāliḥah* wife, this study contributes to the development of a more equitable and context-sensitive Islamic family law discourse that aligns ethical ideals with contemporary social realities (Sulfinadia, 2021).

Literature Review

Harmonious Family and the Concept of the *Ṣāliḥah* Wife

A harmonious family constitutes a fundamental aspiration for every married couple (Sar'an et al., 2024). In Islamic discourse, family harmony is commonly articulated through the concept of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, *wa raḥmah*, referring to a marital life characterized by tranquility, affection, and compassion (Ardi et al., 2025; Sukmawati & Khadafi, 2022). Such harmony does not emerge automatically from the marital bond but is achieved through sustained commitment by both husband and wife to fulfill their respective rights and obligations. A family is considered harmonious when spouses live together in happiness, mutual consent, and existential alignment, experiencing both material sufficiency and emotional serenity within their marital life. Thus, harmony in marriage is not merely an emotional condition but a relational achievement grounded in ethical responsibility and reciprocity.

Islamic teachings emphasize several spiritual and moral bonds that function as adhesive forces sustaining marital unity (Zainal Badri & Zulkarnain, 2024). Quraish Shihab (1996) argues that marital continuity is upheld by five interrelated elements: love, *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, *raḥmah*, and *amānah* (trust). These elements operate as spiritual ties that preserve marriage even when certain emotional dimensions weaken. When love diminishes, *sakinah* may remain; when *mawaddah* fades, *raḥmah* may still endure; and when compassion weakens, *amānah* continues to bind spouses as long as religious commitment persists. This perspective resonates with Qur'anic guidance that discourages hasty divorce, reminding believers that what is disliked may still contain hidden goodness and that patience can yield unforeseen benefits (Q.S. 4:19). Such teachings underscore that marital harmony in Islam rests not on rigid compliance but on moral endurance and ethical restraint (Bukido, L., et al., 2025; Ulfatmi et al., 2025).

Further elaborating this framework, Said Agil Husin al-Munawwar (2003), drawing on prophetic traditions, identifies five foundational pillars of a *sakinah* family: religious orientation, respect for elders and care for the young, moderation in household consumption, courteous social interaction, and continuous self-reflection. Husein Muhammad (2001) later conceptualizes the *sakinah* family as one in which all members experience security, peace, and freedom from fear, highlighting the centrality of protection and emotional safety within the household. This definition implicitly rejects any form of domination or violence as incompatible with the Islamic ideal of family harmony.

These normative principles are also reflected in Indonesian marriage law, which emphasizes partnership, deliberation (*musyawarah*), balanced spousal positions, equality before the law, and mutual love, respect, and cooperation. From a sociological perspective, marriage can be understood as a social contract that endures insofar as both parties attain emotional fulfillment, tranquility, and security, alongside the effective functioning of the family as a unit regulating sexual relations, safeguarding reproductive rights, facilitating socialization, nurturing affection, determining social status, and ensuring economic protection (Ihromi, 2014). Within this framework, marital harmony is contingent upon functional reciprocity rather than unilateral authority.

Nevertheless, the concept of the *ṣāliḥah* wife is frequently reduced to the notion of unconditional obedience to the husband. This reductionist interpretation overlooks classical Islamic scholarship that situates obedience within a moral and theological framework. Abu al-Hasan Nuruddin al-Malahuri, in *Mirqāt al-Mafātīḥ Sharḥ Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ*, asserts that a wife is obligated to seek her husband's pleasure

only insofar as the husband himself embodies piety and obedience to God. When a husband deviates from divine norms, the wife's obligation to prioritize his approval is no longer binding (Malik & Ummah, 2021). This interpretation challenges absolutist readings of obedience and reinforces the ethical conditionality of spousal authority in Islam.

Divorce through the Lens of Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory conceptualizes social behavior as the outcome of reciprocal exchanges between individuals who assess relationships based on perceived benefits and costs (Enayat et al., 2022; Molm, 2015). As social beings, individuals engage in interactions that involve mutual influence and calculated evaluations of advantage and disadvantage (Mighfar, 2015). Social behavior, therefore, emerges from exchanges that are not limited to material objects but encompass symbolic and emotional resources such as recognition, affection, security, and fairness (Homans, 1958).

Skinner's perspective, as discussed by Machmud, emphasizes that social exchange focuses on observable interactions that generate consequences in the form of rewards and costs, whether tangible or intangible (Machmud, 2015). Social relationships are thus sustained only when individuals perceive that the benefits obtained outweigh or at least balance the sacrifices incurred. Wirawan further systematizes this theory by outlining key principles of exchange: individuals as rational actors, diverse and personal exchange motives, cost-benefit calculations, and the importance of social approval as a form of emotional reward (Wirawan, 2014). These principles highlight the inherently evaluative nature of social relationships.

Homans (1962), as interpreted by Syafar, distills social exchange theory into three analytical dimensions: activities, interactions, and feelings. Activities refer to concrete and observable behaviors; interactions describe reciprocal actions that stimulate or respond to others' behavior; and feelings represent emotional states that, although internal, are expressed through attitudes and actions (Homans, 1974; Syafar, 2016). Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing relational dynamics in small social units, including families.

From a sociological standpoint, marriage can be understood as a continuous exchange of rights and obligations, appreciation and sacrifice, between spouses (Karim, 2004). Marital stability depends on the perceived balance of these exchanges. When exchanges are experienced as equitable, commitment is reinforced; when they become asymmetrical—benefiting one party while disadvantaging the other—relational dissatisfaction intensifies. In such circumstances, divorce emerges as a rational response to sustained imbalance. Divorce, in this sense, signifies the termination of a marital relationship due to the failure of one or both spouses to fulfill expected role obligations, resulting in legally recognized separation (Yuniarto et al., 2022).

Rising divorce rates further reflect broader processes of social transformation. Industrialization and the transition toward a conjugal family system have altered traditional family structures and gender roles. Women's increased participation in the workforce expands their economic contributions to the household, necessitating corresponding changes in spousal interaction and domestic labor distribution. However, when patriarchal norms and obedience-centered leadership models persist without adjustment, exchange relations within marriage become increasingly unequal. In such contexts, wives may experience a persistent lack of reciprocity, leading to emotional alienation and the erosion of marital harmony. When the rewards of marriage no longer compensate for its costs, divorce becomes an inevitable outcome.

Method

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of working women who initiated divorce due to discrimination arising from normative interpretations of the *ṣāliḥah* wife as one who must unconditionally obey and submit to her husband, which, in practice, exposed them to various forms of domestic violence and marital dissolution in Pekanbaru. The study focuses on working wives who filed for divorce (*cerai gugat*), with eight (8) participants selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: engagement in paid employment, minimum educational attainment of senior high school, legally divorced and currently living independently, and having children. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation documented using

anecdotal records, enabling the exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, emotions, and attitudes in a comprehensive and nuanced manner (Mulyana, D, 2006). Data analysis was guided by social exchange theory, which emphasizes the dynamics of cost and reward in social relationships and is philosophically rooted in utilitarian thought that views individuals as actors seeking to minimize suffering and maximize benefits. Analytical attention was directed to three core concepts of social exchange theory – activities, interactions, and feelings – where activities refer to concrete marital behaviors, interactions denote reciprocal exchanges between spouses, and feelings represent emotional states expressed through observable attitudes and behaviors, thereby illuminating how perceived imbalances in marital obligations and expectations informed participants' decisions to pursue divorce.

Results and Discussion

Socio-Demographic Context of Participants

This study involved eight divorced working women whose socio-demographic backgrounds provide a critical context for understanding the intersection between the normative construction of the *ṣāliḥah* wife and marital dissolution. All participants were between 40 and 51 years old, indicating a mature stage of adulthood in which marital decisions tend to be shaped by prolonged life experience rather than emotional volatility. This age range suggests that divorce was not a transitional or impulsive response but a deliberative decision made after sustained engagement with marital roles, responsibilities, and expectations over time.

The participants' marital histories further reinforce this interpretation. All respondents had experienced long-term marriages lasting between 10 and 15 years, reflecting a substantial commitment to marital continuity and family stability. These marriages encompassed significant phases of family life, including childrearing and economic cooperation, underscoring that the respondents' decisions to divorce emerged not from fragile unions but from enduring relationships marked by cumulative relational strain. The longevity of these marriages highlights the extent to which unequal power relations and normative pressures had to persist before divorce became a viable option.

The duration of post-divorce experience among participants ranged from four to seven years, enabling reflective distance in narrating their experiences. This temporal gap allowed respondents to reassess their marital lives with greater analytical clarity, identifying patterns of discrimination, violence, and symbolic subordination rooted in obedience-centered interpretations of the *ṣāliḥah* wife (Warman, Zainuddin, et al., 2023). Their narratives thus represent reflective reconstructions rather than immediate emotional responses to marital breakdown.

From an educational perspective, all participants possessed relatively high levels of formal education, with qualifications ranging from diploma (D3) to master's degree (S2). The majority held bachelor's degrees (S1), indicating substantial exposure to formal knowledge systems that potentially enhance critical reasoning and self-reflexivity. Educational attainment functioned as an important resource enabling participants to question religious and cultural discourses that framed unconditional obedience as a moral imperative for wives, particularly when such interpretations justified inequality and normalized various forms of domestic violence.

Occupationally, all respondents were economically active, working as civil servants, private-sector employees, educators, or banking professionals. Their participation in paid employment reflects a degree of economic independence and sustained contribution to household income. However, despite their productive roles, respondents consistently encountered normative expectations that confined them to subordinate marital positions. This disjunction between economic contribution and symbolic subordination reveals a structural tension within contemporary marital relations, where women's labor is acknowledged materially but denied normatively.

The socio-demographic profile of the participants demonstrates that divorce in this study cannot be attributed to marginality, dependency, or immaturity. Instead, it reflects the decisions of mature, educated, and economically active women who reassessed their marriages in light of prolonged imbalances between marital obligations and rewards. This context substantiates the study's broader argument that divorce

functions as a rational and morally grounded response to sustained inequality within marriages shaped by rigid interpretations of the *ṣāliḥah* wife ideal.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Research Participants

| No. | Initials | Current Age | Age at Marriage | Years Since Divorce | Education Level | Occupation |
|-----|----------|-------------|-----------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | BN | 44 | 11 | 6 | Master's Degree (S2) | Civil Servant |
| 2 | WD | 48 | 15 | 5 | Bachelor's Degree (S1) | Civil Servant |
| 3 | YL | 51 | 15 | 7 | Bachelor's Degree (S1) | Private Sector |
| 4 | NI | 45 | 12 | 6 | Bachelor's Degree (S1) | Private Sector |
| 5 | RT | 42 | 10 | 5 | Bachelor's Degree (S1) | Teacher |
| 6 | LS | 49 | 15 | 7 | Diploma (D3) | Private Sector |
| 7 | ML | 43 | 12 | 5 | Bachelor's Degree (S1) | Banking Sector |
| 8 | FA | 40 | 10 | 4 | Diploma (D3) | Private Sector |

Source: Authors' processed data (2024)

The socio-demographic characteristics outlined above are not treated in this study as neutral background variables, but as structurally constitutive elements shaping the respondents' legal consciousness, marital agency, and decision-making processes. The maturity, educational capital, and economic participation of the participants position them as active legal and moral subjects who engage with marriage not merely as a private institution but as a socio-legal arena governed by intersecting religious norms, cultural expectations, and state regulations (Elimartati et al., 2025; Warman, Elimartati, et al., 2023). Within this context, the ideal of the *ṣāliḥah* wife operates not simply as a theological construct, but as a normative regulatory framework that disciplines women's behavior, legitimizes asymmetrical obligations, and constrains women's access to justice and bodily integrity within marriage.

From a socio-legal perspective, the prolonged duration of marriage and delayed timing of divorce indicate that marital dissolution functioned as a last-resort legal strategy rather than an initial response to conflict. Divorce emerged only after sustained experiences of unequal exchange, symbolic subordination, and the normalization of harm under religiously sanctioned narratives of obedience. This pattern underscores how legal subjectivity among working women is produced through everyday negotiations between lived experiences of injustice and the moral grammar provided by religious and legal discourses (Buyukkececi et al., 2025; Kar, 2025).

Drawing on feminist jurisprudence, the participants' profiles illuminate how women's structural contributions—through paid labor, caregiving, and emotional work—were systematically undervalued within marital relations shaped by patriarchal interpretations of Islamic norms. Despite fulfilling both productive and reproductive roles, the respondents remained subject to obedience-based expectations that rendered their suffering invisible and their resistance morally suspect. In this sense, divorce represents not a failure of moral commitment but an assertion of ethical agency and legal self-preservation in response to sustained gendered injustice.

Marital Relational Experiences

The interviews reveal a consistent pattern of marital relations characterized by unequal domestic responsibilities, conditional economic participation, and asymmetrical power relations legitimized through religious and cultural discourses of obedience. Across all cases, respondents reported that domestic labor was constructed as their exclusive and non-negotiable obligation as wives, regardless of their participation in paid employment. Household tasks—including cooking, cleaning, childcare, and serving the husband—were framed as women's "natural" and moral duties. One respondent (BN) explained that within Minangkabau cultural norms, a husband assisting with domestic work would be stigmatized as weak or overly submissive, reinforcing the belief that household labor is inherently feminine (personal interview with BN, Pekanbaru, 2024). Similar narratives were echoed by other respondents, indicating a deep internalization of gendered domestic norms that positioned women as primary

caregivers while absolving men from shared responsibility (personal interviews with WD, YL, NI, RT, LS, MI, and FA, Pekanbaru, 2024).

All respondents were formally permitted by their husbands to engage in paid employment; however, such permission was consistently conditional. Several women were explicitly encouraged—or even urged—by their husbands to work in order to supplement insufficient household income. RT recounted that her decision to return to work shortly after childbirth was driven by her husband’s insistence that he could not meet family needs alone, despite her initial intention to focus on childcare (personal interview with RT, Pekanbaru, 2024). In other cases, respondents initiated employment after recognizing their husbands’ limited earning capacity, but consent was granted only on the condition that domestic responsibilities remained fully intact. WD recalled that her husband emphasized she must not neglect household duties or children and should not “burden” him in any way, underscoring how women’s economic participation was tolerated only insofar as it did not challenge patriarchal domestic arrangements (personal interview with WD, Pekanbaru, 2024).

As women entered the workforce, their income gradually became central to household survival. All respondents reported allocating their earnings almost entirely to family needs, including food, children’s education, and daily expenses. Over time, women’s financial contributions were no longer treated as supplementary but became substitutive, enabling husbands to reduce or withdraw from their obligation to provide maintenance. YL described how her husband progressively curtailed his financial contributions while simultaneously demanding access to her income for his personal expenses, including transportation, cigarettes, and the purchase of a car funded through deductions from her salary (personal interview with YL, Pekanbaru, 2024). Similar experiences were reported by other respondents, illustrating how women’s paid labor was normalized as a collective family resource while men’s financial responsibility diminished (personal interviews with NI, LS, MI, and FA, Pekanbaru, 2024).

Despite the stabilization of household finances through women’s labor, marital harmony did not improve. On the contrary, six out of eight respondents experienced marital infidelity. Infidelity was frequently accompanied by emotional manipulation and moral blame directed at the wife. Husbands accused working wives of neglect, disobedience, or emotional inadequacy, framing their own extramarital relationships as reactions to wives’ perceived failures. MI recounted how her husband threatened divorce while accusing her of egoism and emotional neglect, only for it to later emerge that he was engaged in an ongoing affair (personal interview with MI, Pekanbaru, 2024). In more extreme cases, such as NI’s experience, infidelity occurred during pregnancy and culminated in abandonment, economic dispossession, and physical violence, with marital assets diverted to support the husband’s extramarital relationship (personal interview with NI, Pekanbaru, 2024).

Respondents further described systemic discrimination within marriage, particularly through economic control and symbolic domination. Several husbands explicitly claimed ownership over their wives’ income on the grounds that employment had been granted through male permission, thereby framing women’s earnings as derivative of male authority. YL reported being required to surrender her entire salary to her husband and receiving only limited allowances in return (personal interview with YL, Pekanbaru, 2024). Others faced accusations of financial dishonesty and moral suspicion despite clear evidence that their income was used solely for household needs (personal interviews with WD and FA, Pekanbaru, 2024).

Discrimination also manifested through sexual coercion and moral labeling. Women who expressed exhaustion or reluctance to engage in sexual relations—often due to the combined burden of paid work and domestic labor—were accused of *nushūz* (disobedience) and threatened with polygamy or divorce. RT described being labeled a sinful and disobedient wife after refusing sexual relations due to extreme fatigue, despite her husband’s refusal to work or assist with household tasks; in one instance, this escalated into forced sexual relations (personal interview with RT, Pekanbaru, 2024). Such experiences reveal how religious concepts were instrumentalized to discipline women’s bodies, silence resistance, and normalize violence within marriage (personal interviews with BN, NI, and LS, Pekanbaru, 2024).

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that working wives experienced intersecting forms of domestic injustice, including economic exploitation, psychological abuse, physical violence, infidelity, and

abandonment. Crucially, these harms were consistently legitimized through normative constructions of the *ṣāliḥah* wife as obedient, self-sacrificing, and endlessly accommodating. When confronted, husbands justified marital conflict by framing it as the wife's moral failure rather than as a manifestation of structural inequality. In this context, divorce emerged not as a sudden rupture but as a cumulative response to prolonged injustice, signaling women's assertion of moral agency and legal self-preservation after enduring a chronically imbalanced marital exchange (personal interviews with BN, WD, YL, NI, RT, LS, MI, and FA, Pekanbaru, 2024)

From Obedience to Partnership: Rethinking Marital Exchange in Islamic Family Law

This study employs Homans' Social Exchange Theory to interpret the marital experiences of working women who initiated divorce, focusing on three interrelated analytical dimensions: activities, interactions, and feelings. These dimensions provide a robust framework for understanding how everyday marital practices evolve into structurally unequal exchange relationships. In the cases examined, marital "activities" initially followed normative expectations: husbands were positioned as primary breadwinners, while wives assumed responsibility for domestic labor and caregiving. However, socio-economic transformations and rising living costs have increasingly normalized women's participation in paid work, often with the explicit consent—or even encouragement—of husbands. As previous studies suggest, women's entry into the labor market is frequently framed as voluntary assistance to husbands rather than as an assertion of economic agency (Uddin, 2025). Yet, as the findings demonstrate, this framing has profound consequences for how obligations, rights, and authority are renegotiated within marriage.

Empirically, the requirement of husbands' permission for wives to work emerged as a critical mechanism of gendered control rather than mere marital coordination (Begum et al., 2024). While permission was formally granted, it was almost always conditional upon women's continued fulfillment of domestic duties without redistribution of labor. This condition produced a systematic double burden, wherein women were expected to perform both productive and reproductive labor simultaneously. In several cases, husbands further instrumentalized women's labor by encouraging home-based or multiple employment arrangements while withdrawing from their own economic responsibilities. Such practices effectively transformed women into primary economic providers without corresponding recognition or authority, confirming earlier findings that conditional permission can function as a source of structural discrimination and domestic violence (Alfitri, 2020). From a social exchange perspective, the imbalance between women's escalating costs and diminishing rewards marked the beginning of marital instability.

The findings further reveal that perceived shifts in economic power—particularly when wives' income equaled or exceeded that of husbands—triggered heightened conflict, mistrust, and symbolic violence (Salama & Karrat, 2024). Husbands frequently interpreted women's financial contribution not as collective family capital but as a threat to male authority, leading to accusations of disobedience and moral deviance. In many cases, marital infidelity emerged at this stage, not as an isolated moral failure but as part of a broader pattern of gendered domination. Consistent with previous studies, husbands' extramarital relationships were often justified by blaming wives for alleged neglect, disobedience, or emotional inadequacy, thereby masking betrayal with moral rationalization (Irbathy, 2022). The study's findings confirm that women who had fulfilled both domestic and economic obligations nonetheless received negative social and emotional responses from their spouses, indicating a profound rupture in reciprocal exchange.

Within Homans' framework, marital interaction remains stable only when both parties perceive a fair balance between cost and reward. However, the respondents' narratives illustrate a progressive erosion of this balance. Although wives contributed materially, emotionally, and domestically, they were denied corresponding rewards in the form of trust, respect, emotional security, or shared responsibility. Instead, husbands maintained unilateral authority as household leaders whose decisions were beyond negotiation. This asymmetry generated multiple forms of conflict—economic conflict due to neglected maintenance obligations, trust conflict resulting from infidelity, and communication breakdowns characterized by dishonesty and intimidation. Mistrust and ineffective communication are among the most corrosive factors in marital stability, ultimately undermining the relational foundation of the family.

From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, divorce in these cases represents a rational response to chronic imbalance rather than impulsive emotional rupture. When the cumulative costs of marriage—economic exploitation, psychological abuse, sexual coercion, and moral degradation—consistently outweigh perceived rewards, individuals are likely to terminate the exchange relationship (Nelli & Lubis, 2022). The respondents' decisions to seek divorce thus reflect a recalibration of agency grounded in lived experience, rather than a rejection of marital or religious values per se. Divorce becomes a strategy of self-preservation within an exchange system that has ceased to function equitably.

Central to this imbalance is the dominant construction of the *ṣāliḥah* wife as one whose primary virtue lies in unconditional obedience. In practice, this construction has been used to legitimize gendered hierarchies, including the normalization of economic control and even physical discipline. Such interpretations not only marginalize women but also contradict the ethical objectives (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) of justice, dignity, and mutual protection. Islamic marital relations are not intended as relations of domination but as partnerships grounded in reciprocity, compassion, and moral responsibility. Both spouses are obligated to treat one another with kindness and to cultivate tranquility (*sakinah*), affection (*mawaddah*), and mercy (*rahmah*) (Farida & Kasdi, 2021).

In light of contemporary socio-economic realities, the study reinforces arguments that marital maintenance should no longer be conceptualized as a unilateral male obligation or a hidden female burden, but as a shared responsibility negotiated through mutual agreement. Shared economic responsibility has the potential to foster solidarity, reduce power asymmetries, and prevent domestic violence by reinforcing interdependence rather than domination. The findings resonate with scholarship advocating relational reciprocity and partnership-based family models as antidotes to patriarchal abuse (Haitomi, 2021). When domestic and economic responsibilities are shared, the likelihood of equitable exchange increases, strengthening marital resilience.

This study argues for a reconstructed understanding of the *ṣāliḥah* wife that is consistent with both Islamic normative ethics and contemporary gender justice (Jafar et al., 2025). Obedience cannot be demanded toward a spouse who violates ethical and legal norms, nor can it be weaponized to silence women's suffering. Classical Islamic sources emphasize partnership and moral accountability for both spouses, positioning marriage as a cooperative enterprise rather than a hierarchy of control. Reframing marital obligations as shared, negotiated, and ethically bounded enables the cultivation of mutual love, protection, and dignity. In this sense, the breakdown of marriage among the respondents should be read not as moral failure, but as a critical signal of structural injustice within prevailing interpretations of marital obedience—an injustice that must be addressed to prevent further cycles of violence and marital dissolution.

Conclusion

This study reveals that marital conflict and dissolution among working women in Pekanbaru are not the result of individual moral failure but are structurally produced by unequal gender relations embedded in dominant interpretations of marital obedience and the ideal of the *ṣāliḥah* wife. Using Social Exchange Theory, the findings demonstrate a systematic imbalance between costs and rewards in marital interactions, where women's economic contributions are normalized while reciprocity, emotional support, and shared responsibility are withheld. As reciprocity collapses, marriage shifts from a cooperative institution to a hierarchical relationship marked by domination, discrimination, and violence. The findings further indicate that religious narratives of obedience are frequently instrumentalized to legitimize economic exploitation, psychological control, accusations of *nusyūz*, and tolerance of male infidelity. Such practices contradict the ethical foundations of Islamic family law, particularly the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* principles of justice, dignity, and mutual protection. Rather than sustaining marital harmony, rigid and patriarchal interpretations erode trust, communication, and emotional security, thereby accelerating marital breakdown. This study underscores the urgency of reframing marital maintenance as a shared obligation grounded in reciprocity rather than unilateral authority. Indonesian family law and religious counseling frameworks should explicitly recognize joint economic responsibility, prohibit the misuse of

religious norms to justify domestic violence, and integrate gender-sensitive interpretations of obedience into judicial and mediation practices. Strengthening these normative shifts is essential to fostering equitable marital relations and preventing domestic violence in contemporary Muslim families.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who helped in the process of researching, writing, and publishing this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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