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WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND *BELIS* TRADITION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN LEMBATA, ALOR, AND SUMBA, EAST NUSA TENGGARA

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Abstract

Belis, a form of respect for brides and their families in the marriage tradition of East Nusa Tenggara, has slowly shifted in meaning, becoming a form of legitimization of women's rights violations. This study aims to critically examine the practice of Belis in East Nusa Tenggara by analyzing its impact on women's rights and their social status. Data collection in this study used a literature review method by examining secondary data, such as books, articles, journals, and all forms of reports relevant to the issues discussed. The results of this study highlight the role of the belis in legitimizing male authority and limiting women to subordinate roles in households and society. These findings show that although the belis is culturally considered a symbol of honor, in practice, it reinforces patriarchal structures that weaken women's decision-making power, economic independence, and participation in public life. Cases such as bride kidnapping in Sumba and various incidents of domestic violence highlight how belis often serve as cultural justifications for the coercion, ownership, and control of women. In addition, statistical data from government agencies and NGOs confirm the high prevalence of gender-based violence in the region, highlighting the urgency of the intervention.

Keywords: *Belis; Woman; Gender Equity; Human Rights*

Abstract

Belis sebagai bentuk penghormatan kepada pengantin perempuan dan keluarganya dalam tradisi perkawinan di Nusa Tenggara Timur perlahan mengalami pegeseran makna yang menjadikannya bentuk legitimasi terhadap pelanggaran hak perempuan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara kritis praktik Belis di Nusa Tenggara Timur dengan menganalisis dampaknya terhadap hak-hak perempuan dan status sosial mereka. Pengumpulan data dalam penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi literatur dengan melakukan kajian terhadap data-data sekunder seperti buku, artikel, jurnal, dan segala

bentuk laporan yang sesuai dengan permasalahan yang diangkat. Hasil dari penelitian ini menyoroti peran belis dalam melegitimasi otoritas laki-laki dan membatasi perempuan pada peran subordinat dalam rumah tangga dan masyarakat. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun belis secara budaya dianggap sebagai simbol kehormatan, dalam praktiknya belis memperkuat struktur patriarki yang melemahkan kekuasaan pengambilan keputusan perempuan, kemandirian ekonomi, dan partisipasi mereka dalam kehidupan publik. Kasus seperti penculikan pengantin di Sumba dan berbagai insiden kekerasan dalam rumah tangga menyoroti bagaimana belis sering kali menjadi pembenaran budaya untuk paksaan, kepemilikan, dan kontrol atas perempuan. Selain itu, data statistik dari lembaga pemerintah dan LSM mengonfirmasi tingginya prevalensi kekerasan berbasis gender di wilayah tersebut, menyoroti urgensi intervensi.

Kata Kunci: Belis, Perempuan, Kesetaraan Gender, Hak Asasi Manusia

INTRODUCTION

The Gender issues highlighting women's rights within the strong binding traditions have become the primary focus in discussing women's rights in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). Women's societal position is often influenced by deeply rooted cultural practices, which shape their roles, responsibilities, and opportunities in both domestic and social spheres. These dynamics are not only important for understanding gender relations in NTT but also for examining broader challenges in achieving gender equality and protecting women's rights in Indonesia.

One of the central traditions shaping gender relations in NTT is *Belis*' practice. *Belis* or dowry refers to a material gift, such as money, livestock, or gold, given by the groom's family to the bride's family, symbolizing gratitude and appreciation (Kleden 2017; Rodliyah et al. 2017; Susanti, Wibowo, and Wilujeng 2015). While *Belis* is culturally perceived as a gesture of honor, it is also an obligation that can burden both families. Nuwa (2019)

emphasizes that the tradition often shifts into a social expectation that reinforces unequal power relations, which obliges a woman to respect and serve the groom's parents fully, placing women in vulnerable conditions. In addition to the heavy burden of responsibilities, the misinterpretation of the *Belis* culture results in NTT women often facing violence in various forms, both physical and psychological (Nafi et al., 2016).

Despite extensive cultural research in Indonesia, studies on *Belis* remain largely descriptive, focusing on its symbolic meaning (Rodliyah et al. 2016; Sukmantoro and Suyitno 2023), rather than its implications for women's rights and well-being. Few studies critically explore how the practice contributes to discrimination, reinforces patriarchal structures, and perpetuates violence against women in rural NTT communities (Sihotang, Rato, and Heryanti 2023; Suriadi and bin Ismail 2021). This gap highlights the need for a deeper investigation into how

traditions such as *Belis* interact with broader issues of gender inequality, education, and access to justice.

Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the practice of *Belis* in East Nusa Tenggara by analyzing its impact on women's rights and social status. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand how *Belis* functions as a cultural mechanism that reinforces male dominance in both household and social life within NTT society.

This study is expected to enrich the literature on *Belis* by not only describing its symbolic meaning but also critiquing its implications for women's rights, power relations, and patriarchal structures in NTT society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human rights represent a profound recognition of moral values upheld by the global community, legitimizing the concept that every person is entitled to live in freedom and without fear (Kumar, 2024). The existing literature shows that the protection of women's rights has been legitimized through international legal instruments such as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading

Treatment or Punishment, and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). However, such normative recognition often stops at the declarative level without producing substantial changes in social reality. As MacKinnon (1993), argues, the concept of human rights tends to depart from the general human experience, rather than the specific experience of women, resulting in women's needs being neglected in both the public and private spheres. MacKinnon's statement reveals a fundamental weakness in the conceptual foundation of human rights, which actually opens up space for the reproduction of discrimination.

On the other hand, studies conducted by Johnston (2019) and O'Brien et al. (2017) focused on the exposure to gender discrimination that still occurs globally, but lacked analysis of how social structures and cultural constructs reinforce this inequality. Although this gap is addressed in the research by Manzi (2019) and Koenig & Eagly (2014), which analyzes the social stigma surrounding the roles of men and women, but is more descriptive in explaining the traditional division of roles. The study does not address how traditional authorities, such as customary institutions, consciously or unconsciously perpetuate inequality through policies, customary rules, and social practices that limit women's mobility.

Thus, the roots of gender-discriminatory cultural practices lie not only in cultural constructs but also in the dominance of local institutions in intervening and maintaining unequal gender relations.

Other studies have found that gender roles are internalized from an early age (Singh 2023; Tenenbaum and Leaper 2003), as well as discrimination occurring in educational institutions (Ahmed, 2024; Cheryan et al., 2017), which shows how gender bias is maintained within the family and formal institutions. However, these studies still focus on the micro level, while their consequences in social institutions are often overlooked. Similarly, in the context of the workplace (Siddique 2018; Blau & DeVaro 2007; Eagly et al. 2007), the literature has highlighted women's limited access to high-level positions, but has not critically linked this to social factors at the local level.

Thus, this study positions itself at the intersection of two issues. First, it critiques the limitations of the literature, which remains trapped in normative and descriptive explanations. Second, the roots of culturally discriminatory practices against gender lie not only in social constructs, but also in the dominance of local institutions in intervening and maintaining traditions that reinforce unequal gender relations. This focus allows the study to explain the forms of

discrimination and assess the extent to which local traditions and institutional structures play a role in creating space for gender inequality.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to explain how the tradition of *belis* in marriage in the East Nusa Tenggara community affects women's rights and freedoms. Qualitative methodology allows researchers to explore human experiences (actors) in depth to produce rich observations that reject numerical reduction. In addition, qualitative methods offer flexibility in investigating phenomena that are not yet fully understood (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). This article was written using secondary materials. The secondary materials were collected in several ways and covered several types.

All data and information were obtained from previous studies, online news media, and data from government agencies or NGOs limited to the period 2009–2024. This time indicator is expected to focus the search and provide an overview or pattern of the development of the *Belis* tradition and its impact on women's rights amid changes over the past 15 years. However, the researcher does not rule out the use of references outside this period if they are relevant to other findings.

Several research stages are required to collect various data and information components. In the first stage, to collect multiple previous studies relevant to the focus of this study, the author used three keywords as limitations. These keywords include Gender, *Belis*, and culture. The process of searching for information is not easy. This is because NTT has ethnic and cultural diversity, resulting in differences in marriage and *belis* traditions. An understanding of the similarities in *belis* traditions in several regions in NTT is necessary so that an analysis of *belis* traditions related to women's rights and status can be carried out without obstacles (*belis* traditions that follow the patrilineal line will differ from matrilineal *belis* traditions). The search results found 18 previous studies relevant to the focus of this study.

Second, the search for information obtained from news media used two keywords: violence against women and East Nusa Tenggara. The selection of cases in the news media focused on domestic violence against women and children due to their social status, which is considered lower than that of men, requiring them to be obedient and submissive to men's wishes. Nine cases were found based on these restrictions, and after analysis, four cases were found to be relevant to the topic of this study. Meanwhile, data obtained from

government agencies and/or NGOs related to discrimination and violence experienced by women in the household is not easy to find. Although the data is generally available, experience and analytical skills are needed to see and distinguish data related to social behavior in the *Belis* culture regarding discrimination and violence experienced by women in the household, both physical and psychological violence. From the search results, four data sets from various institutions were found.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Belis Practice in Marriage among the East Nusa Tenggara Society

The diverse forms of *belis* in East Nusa Tenggara are important to identify in order to understand the general patterns in how the people of East Nusa Tenggara view the value and meaning of *belis*. *Belis*, a term frequently used by the people of East Nusa Tenggara, refers to the tradition of giving a dowry by the groom's family to the bride as an expression of gratitude and respect. *Belis* is closely linked to marital wealth. Hence, the *belis* given to the bride's family is highly varied and holds both traditional and significant economic value.

The significance of *belis* extends beyond a mere custom or cultural practice; it symbolizes how social structures have influenced the rights and obligations of individuals. A man who wishes to marry a

woman from another tribe must fulfil his obligation by providing the *belis* requested by the bride's family. Once this obligation is met, the groom gains the right to take the bride from her father's family. From this concept, it is evident that after fulfilling the *belis* obligation, the woman becomes the husband's possession and must leave her tribe as part of her duty.

To examine the comparison of *belis* traditions, this study will focus on three regions that practice the *belis* culture: the Sumba people, who use animals in their *belis* tradition; the Lembata (Lamaholot) people, who use elephant tusks; and the Alor people, who use Moko. The following table presents a comparison of the *belis* traditions in these three regions:

Table 1. Comparison of *Belis* Traditions in Three Regions

No	Aspect	Sumba	Lembata (Lamaholot)	Alor
1	Symbol of <i>Belis</i>	Livestock (horses, buffaloes), jewelry, weapons, and clothing	Elephant tusks	Moko (Bronze gong)
2	Meaning of <i>Belis</i>	Expression of gratitude to parents; honoring women	Respect for women as the center of life; symbol of noble bond in marriage	Symbol of a man's seriousness in marriage; sacred and mystical value in the presentation of moko
3	Stages of <i>Belis</i>	1. <i>Ngidi Pamama</i> (bringing betel leaves); 2. <i>Pithak Pamama</i> (covering betel leaves); 3. <i>Dadang Nulang Lunung Tapu</i> (rolling mats and lifting pillows)	1. <i>Dokakelermal</i> (engagement); 2. <i>Kehe'bong</i> (negotiation of <i>belis</i> value); 3. <i>Inan ne giling</i> (mother's milk);	1. <i>Mol bel batat</i> (custom of paying mas kawin); 2. Process of preparing moko; 3. <i>Afeng</i> tradition (mutual assistance)
4	Role of Adat Figures	<i>Wunang</i> (negotiation intermediary)	<i>Opulake</i> (respected customary figure in the family)	Chief of adat (leads ceremonial proceedings and invites all clans)
5	Symbolic Value	<i>Belis</i> as a symbol of cosmic balance and traditional way of life	Represents noble ties in marriage and respect for women	Moko as a symbol of union between man and woman in marriage
6	Mystical Value	Use of specific animals considered to have magical value	Customary process involving symbolic objects and adat figures	Presentation of moko contains mystical and sacred values
7	Valuable Objects	Livestock, jewelry, weapons, clothing	Elephant tusks	Moko
8	Symbol of Integrity and Mutual Assistance	<i>Belis</i> tradition involves the entire family in negotiation and ceremonial process	<i>Dokakelermal</i> tradition involves extended family in <i>belis</i> presentation	<i>Afeng</i> tradition emphasizes the importance of support and cooperation among community members

Source: Processed by researchers 2024

The regions that are the focus of this study show differences in the use of *belis* symbols

in the wedding traditions. This situation reflects a social construct that reinforces the position of men as owners and controllers of

resources. In Sumba, using livestock (buffalo and horses) affirms the economic status of men as rulers of productive wealth. Livestock, which is a highly valuable asset, means that men who can provide large numbers of livestock are seen as having high economic and social status. At the same time, women are positioned as symbols of family honour obtained through the transfer of *belis*.

In Lembata (Lamaholot), elephant tusks are sacred and aristocratic symbols. Ownership of tusks, which are rare and only possessed by a select few, indicates a strict social hierarchy. The status of women in Lamaholot marriages is not only related to themselves, but also represents the honour and position of their families. As a result, women are seen as a medium for maintaining social stratification. At the same time, decisions regarding the value of elephant tusks deemed appropriate for dowry remain in the hands of men from both families to be negotiated as the owners and providers of the elephant tusks.

Meanwhile, in Alor, *moko* as a symbol of *belis* has mystical value and is considered an ancestral heirloom. Because *moko* is inherited and guarded by the male line, control over this sacred symbol reinforces the exclusivity of masculinity. Women in this context are placed as recipients of the symbol, not owners, so power relations remain unequal.

Thus, although these three regions display different symbols, the common thread of the *belis* symbol is the same, as it legitimises patriarchy.

The Role of Women in the Customary Structure of East Nusa Tenggara Society

In this study, the author delves deeper into the role of women in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) society through various aspects of daily life. The strong influence of patriarchal culture on the status of women in NTT imposes limitations on women's rights in many aspects but also positions them as the centre of family and community responsibilities. This study focuses on the diverse tasks and responsibilities, women's rights, and the constraints arising from NTT's societal traditions. Within NTT's social structure, women play crucial roles in almost every domain, both within households and the broader community. In households, women's roles extend beyond caregiving to include significant economic activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and traditional weaving. Additionally, within the community, women participate in various ceremonial practices.

The role of women in households and communities is not merely viewed as tasks and responsibilities but forms a deeply rooted identity among NTT women. Below is a table presenting the tasks and roles of women across various aspects of life in NTT:

Table 2. The Role of Women in East Nusa Tenggara

No	Aspect	Responsibilities	Rights	Limitations
1	Household	Managing the family, caring for children, responsibility to the husband.	Valued as the center of domestic responsibility within the family and involved in minor household decisions.	There is no explicit prohibition, but strong patriarchal culture limits rights in major decision-making.
2	Economy	Assisting husband in farming and animal husbandry, preparing seeds, cultivation, harvesting, post-harvest management, livestock care.	Women have the right to check food availability, while men are strictly forbidden from checking food availability.	Women are not allowed to participate in labor-intensive farming activities such as plowing.
		Weaving cloth, learning to weave from a young age, producing quality textiles.	Only women are allowed to touch weaving tools, while men are strictly forbidden from touching weaving tools.	In some areas still steeped in customs and traditions, only women capable of producing good textiles are allowed to marry.
3	Social	In ceremonies or customary meetings, women prepare food, provide ceremonial facilities, and attend as ceremony participants.	In some areas, women are given the right to express opinions and suggestions (within certain limits). In other areas, women are prohibited from speaking or expressing their opinions.	Opinions and suggestions from women do not necessarily have to be listened to.
4	Inheritance	Women do not play a role in inheritance distribution.	Receive some household items, woven fabrics, and jewelry as tokens of affection.	There is no explicit prohibition, but inheritance rights belong inherently to male offspring.

Source: Processed by researchers 2024

The information presented in Table 2. shows that women in East Nusa Tenggara play an important role in the household, economic production, and social life, but these roles remain limited within the framework of patriarchy. Although women are trusted to manage domestic affairs and produce culturally and economically valuable products such as woven fabrics, they are systematically excluded from important decision-making,

inheritance rights, and labour-intensive agricultural work.

This dynamic shows that *belis* not only regulates marriage exchanges but also shapes broader gender power structures: men inherit land and hold authority in decision-making, while women's contributions, although essential to the family's survival, are defined as obligations rather than rights. In this way, the *belis* system supports hegemonic masculinity by legitimizing male dominance, both as a

cultural norm and a structural reality in NTT society.

Report on Cases of Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

In this section, the author will delve deeper into cases of discrimination and violations of women's rights in East Nusa Tenggara, using online news sources to uncover the truth behind cultural practices that subordinate women to men. Cases identified through online news searches will illustrate forms of gender-based violence and discrimination perpetrated against victims, both within domestic settings and through other acts of violence stemming from gender discrimination. This research aims to explore the factual basis behind previously presented data and figures. Some online news sources may lack detailed information, such as the chronology and reasons behind the violence, posing challenges for the author in analysing the relational factors underlying violence and discrimination faced by women.

Another challenge faced by the author in the process of online news research is the lack of information regarding the marital status of the parties involved (whether through the *belis* process or not). Additionally, online news often presents very enticing titles, yet the content of the news may not align with its title, necessitating the author to cross-check information obtained from online news with data from different sources.

Furthermore, the information and news to be presented in the following section may not provide detailed insights into various cases occurring in the field, considering that not all violence cases are reported and pursued through legal channels for resolution.

The first case involves D, who became a victim of the "bride kidnapping" cultural practice in Sumba. Bride kidnapping is a marriage tradition in Sumba where women who are to be married are abducted and taken as wives (Bembot and Sermada 2022). D's case began with the viral spread of a video on social media showing a woman being abducted by several men dressed in traditional attire (Bere and Kurniati 2023). In the video recorded by local residents, D's frightened face is visible as she struggles helplessly while several men rejoice in successfully capturing her.

After the capture, D was lifted into a pickup truck and taken away. The victim, forcibly taken, shouted for help, but onlookers at the scene could only watch from a distance without being able to intervene. Responding to community reports, the police acted swiftly and apprehended nine individuals. Following investigation, five individuals were released after being deemed uninvolved. The remaining suspects, J, M, H, and V, were arrested and designated as suspects. The victim's mother (K), who was also found guilty, faced lighter charges due to requests from women activists (Mazrieva 2023).

The second case involves E, who was severely beaten by her husband (Huda 2021). Initially, E and her husband left home to water watermelon plants in their garden. After watering, E proceeded to clean the freshly harvested onions while her husband, M, went to turn off the water pump at the well. However, after some time had passed without M returning to the garden, E went looking for him and found M drinking alcohol with some friends. E urged her husband to return home, but M refused as he wanted to continue drinking with his friends.

After finishing their drinks, M and E finally headed home on a motorcycle. In a drunken state, M rode the motorcycle at high speed, prompting E to scold him throughout the journey. Eventually, E asked M to drop her off in front of a church. When E got off, M asked her to get back on, but she refused. This led to an argument that escalated into M crashing into E, causing her to fall into the church fence. When a bystander attempted to help, M pushed the bystander away and struck E on her left shoulder and ear, causing her ear to bleed (Bere and Agriesta 2021). Feeling intense pain, E went to the Rote Barat Daya Police Station to report her husband.

The third case involves a fatal incident where F was burned alive by her husband, A. This brutal act of violence occurred on November 28, 2023 (Taris and Kurniati 2023). Before setting F on fire, A had assaulted her by hitting her head with a hammer. Unsatisfied with this act of violence, A then doused F with

kerosene and set her on fire while she was still writhing in pain. Additionally, A struck one of their twin children, S, on the head with a hammer to prevent the child from disclosing the incident.

As F burned, A took S to the bathroom, covering S's mouth to stifle any cries. As the fire grew, A carried S out of the burning house. Although S survived, they sustained burns on their legs and serious head injuries, including a bruised left eyelid (Ardin 2024). As A exited the house, he brandished a machete to threaten his father, who had come to extinguish the fire, but was prevented by his sister and subsequently fled into the forest. A was captured three days later. It was revealed that F and A had frequent arguments, with F reportedly fighting with her husband up to eight times before being found lifeless in her home. After these disputes, F often sought refuge at her parents' house and would only return when A came to apologize and fetch her.

The fourth case involves violence experienced by S, inflicted by her husband, Y. This violence was triggered by Y's dissatisfaction with the separation from his wife (Bere 2024). Y not only assaulted S but also attacked her parents. The incident began when Y, upset about the separation, went to his in-laws' house and beat S severely. During the assault, S's neighbor, T, witnessed the incident and attempted to intervene. However, T's effort to stop Y resulted in Y attacking him as well. Fortunately, several community members arrived to stop Y's brutal actions. The victims,

unwilling to accept such treatment, promptly reported Y to the police. It was also noted that Y had previously assaulted S in October 2023 (Bria 2024).

The cases above reveal patterns of violence that, although seemingly different, have the same roots in unequal power relations between men and women legitimized by the tradition of *belis*. In the case of bride kidnapping in Sumba, the practice of kidnapping brides cannot be separated from the heavy obligation of *belis*. Expensive *belis* often encourage the groom's family to take shortcuts by kidnapping the bride-to-be as a form of “coercion” so that the marriage can take place without fulfilling all economic demands. Thus, *belis* not only becomes a symbol of respect, but also creates cultural legitimacy for acts of coercion against women.

In cases of domestic violence, such as those experienced by E, F, and S, *belis* plays a role in shaping the perception that women are the “property” of their husbands once the *belis* obligation has been fulfilled. This status of ownership is often used as a basis for justifying violence, where husbands feel entitled to control, punish, and even injure their wives because they are considered to have purchased the rights to their wives' bodies and lives. Extreme violence such as the burning alive experienced by F shows how this construction of ownership can turn

into total domination that disregards women's right to life.

In addition, the patriarchal culture legitimized by the *belis* system further reinforces the passive attitude of the surrounding community. In case D, for example, witnesses simply watched the kidnapping without attempting to help, because the practice is still considered part of legitimate “custom.” This shows how *belis* is not merely an economic tradition, but a symbolic system that silences social resistance to gender-based violence.

Government and Non-Governmental Organization Reports

Gender-based violence and discrimination continue to have a significant impact on the lives of many women. According to data released by the Technical Implementation Unit of the Office for the Protection of Women and Children in East Nusa Tenggara (Soetrisno, 2024), there were 108 cases of violence against women in 2021, which increased to 152 cases in the following year, and slightly decreased to 150 cases in 2023. Of the total cases, psychological violence was the most reported with 128 cases, followed by 9 cases of physical violence, 8 cases of neglect, 2 cases of rape, and 3 cases of human trafficking. During the period 2021-2022, the Legal Aid Institute of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice in NTT (2024) also experienced an increase in reported cases of violence, with the number of cases rising from

36 in 2021 to 71 in 2022. LBH APIK NTT's report indicated that cases of violence against women increased by 50% during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, data recorded in the Online Information System for the Protection of Women and Children (SIMFONI-PPA) showed that out of 10,251 cases of violence in 2024, 8,914 were experienced by women. This data also revealed that 88.7% of the perpetrators of violence were men. According to the latest data from SIMFONI PPA in 2024, from January 1 to June 17, there were 420 cases of violence in NTT, with 377 cases involving female victims. This violence is influenced by various complex factors, one of which is the dominance of men influenced by the strong patriarchal culture in society.

A study conducted by The Australia Indonesia Partnership for Health Security (AIHSP) highlighted the high cases of violence faced by women and children in NTT in 2022. Data from the NTT Office for the Empowerment of Women and Children showed 637 cases of violence against women and 597 cases against children. More than 76.88% of child violence cases involved girls, highlighting the gender disparity in violence. Domestic violence is the most common form of violence experienced by women, while girls often fall victim to sexual violence. About 97.89% of child sexual violence cases involved girls.

In the AIHSP report, the Protestant Church in Timor (GMIT) House of Hope in 2021 explained that women's vulnerability to

domestic violence is closely related to gender norms in society. Acts of violence, such as abuse of wives, are considered normal if the wife does not fulfill her role as a "wife/woman" in the household. Other triggering factors include the expensive tradition of *belis* (dowry), which leads to wives being considered the property of their husbands.

Plan Indonesia Foundation provided a report on gender violence and discrimination in Lembata Regency, NTT. Of the total 74 child respondents, 17 admitted to still experiencing verbal violence at home, and 19% mentioned violence occurring at school. 29 children were unwilling to answer questions about violence at school, citing previous experiences of violence and lack of knowledge about violence as reasons. Additionally, 28% of female respondents stated that they did not have private space at home, which impacted their experience of violence by 44% during the crisis.

The report issued by Plan Indonesia Foundation also indicated that only 10% of women were involved in various decision-making processes within the family due to the tradition of *belis*, which renders women the property of their husbands. In 2021, Plan also reported that women's involvement in public affairs was very low. Of the 144 village heads, only one was a woman. Furthermore, there was no female representation in the legislative body from 2019 to 2024. In the local government institutions, only one woman held the position of

head of the Office for the Empowerment of Women and Child Protection.

DISCUSSION

The status of women in East Nusa Tenggara, as in many other regions, is heavily shaped by cultural traditions that place them in a subordinate position to men, including their social status (Gasa and Candra 2020; Minde 2015). Gender roles are conceptualized as masculine and feminine, influencing the division of labor and allocation of resources within the family (Eagly 1987). In this framework, women are closely tied to household responsibilities, whereas authority, decision-making, and symbolic power remain attached to men. This condition illustrates how cultural values intersect with the concept of hegemonic masculinity, where male dominance is legitimized and reproduced through cultural traditions and gendered divisions of labor (Connell 2020; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Despite their confinement in domestic life, women in the NTT assume multiple roles in society. They assist their husbands in farming and livestock rearing (Alami, Raharjo, and Astuti 2014; Fina 2014; Kumar et al. 2023), contribute to traditional ceremonies, and actively engage in economic activities such as weaving (Limahelu et al., 2019). However, while highlighting women's visible contributions, these responsibilities remain framed within patriarchal expectations. This paradox

demonstrates that women's agency is not absent, but is channelled into roles that ultimately reinforce male authority.

A central cultural practice that strongly shapes gender relations is the tradition of *belis* or dowries. Across Sumba, Lembata, and Alor, *belis* varies in symbols, procedures, and meanings, yet its essence as a marker of appreciation, obligation, respect, and social status remains consistent. On the one hand, the *belis* legitimizes male authority by placing men at the center of the household and kinship power. On the other hand, in some community narratives, it is also viewed as a symbol of honor and recognition for women and their families. This duality makes *belis* more complex than a simple patriarchal transaction because it embodies both respect and inequality.

The practice of *belis* also reflects how masculinity is glorified by a man's ability to meet the requirements of the bride's family. In Sumba, horses and buffaloes symbolize wealth and prestige, while in Alor and Lembata, moko and elephant tusks are connected to social status and cultural heritage. Thus, *belis* strengthens men's authority within the social hierarchy but also creates space for interpreting women as valued figures who strengthen kinship and ensure cultural continuity. *Belis*, therefore, operates both as a reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity and as a cultural expression of respect.

Traditional institutions and kinship structures, particularly uncles, sustain the practice of *belis*. Cultural norms and social hierarchies are preserved through clan involvement in determining their type and amount. This localized system of masculinity is not only about control and authority, but also about symbolic exchanges tied to cultural heritage. In this sense, the NTT context adds nuance to Connell's theory (2005), showing that hegemonic masculinity can be legitimized through ritualized practices, symbolic capital, and customary obligations.

Thus, the implications of these gendered structures are significant. Women remain confined to domestic and secondary roles, are excluded from decision making, and have restricted mobility and public participation. Customary laws legitimize male authority and reinforce patriarchal norms, making women vulnerable to physical, psychological, and sexual discrimination and violence. Moreover, cultural expectations encourage men to suppress emotions such as fear or sadness while legitimizing anger and aggression, thereby normalizing violence as a way to assert power. This dynamic illustrates how hegemonic masculinity in NTT is sustained not only through structural dominance but also through cultural expectations of behavior and symbolic exchanges.

Rather than repeatedly emphasizing women's subordination under hegemonic masculinity, it is important to highlight

how NTT provides a distinctive manifestation of this theory. The symbolic use of *moko*, tusks, or livestock demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity in NTT is maintained not only through everyday gendered practices but also through cultural heritage objects that embody authority and prestige. This adds nuance to the existing theory, showing that patriarchal power is materially and symbolically legitimized in ways unique to this region.

At the same time, customary law in NTT does not merely operate as a neutral guideline but actively sustains gender hierarchies. By restricting women's participation in decision-making and legitimizing men's authority, customary norms institutionalize hegemonic masculinity differently from the Western or urban contexts often described in the literature. This suggests that local traditions should be critically analyzed as dynamic arenas in which power relations are both preserved and contested, rather than viewed solely as static structures.

Finally, the issue of violence should be framed not only as an extension of male dominance but also as part of a broader cultural process that connects masculinity, authority, and the *belis* tradition. Violence in NTT is legitimized not only through the suppression of emotions and control over women but also through the symbolic capital granted to men who successfully fulfil *belis* obligations. This indicates that the practice of *belis* functions as a cultural justification for male authority, in

which both symbolic exchange and physical coercion reinforce each other. Such insights show that hegemonic masculinity in NTT cannot be reduced to individual behavior alone but must be understood as embedded within the ritual, custom, and social hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that although the communities of Sumba, Lembata, and Alor have diverse symbols of dowry, regardless of the use of livestock, elephant tusks, or moko, all three have the same basic pattern: legitimizing male authority and limiting women to subordinate roles in the household and community. This comparative study highlights how this cultural practice, despite being a symbol of respect for the bride and her family, reinforces patriarchal structures that reduce women's decision-making power, economic independence, and social participation. The case of bride kidnapping in Sumba, along with incidents of domestic violence recorded in NTT, shows that *belis* is not merely a symbolic tradition but can serve as a cultural justification for coercion, ownership, and control over women. Statistical data from government agencies and NGOs further confirm the high prevalence of gender-based violence in the region, highlighting the urgent need for intervention.

The duality of *belis*, as a tradition of respect and confirmation of inequality, illustrates that hegemonic masculinity is maintained not only through daily activities but also through symbolic heirlooms, such as moko, elephant tusks, and livestock. This adds a unique dimension to the theory of hegemonic masculinity by showing that patriarchal authority in NTT is legitimized through material and cultural exchanges embedded in customary law. Therefore, *belis* is not merely a local practice; it is a cultural mechanism that shapes power relations, social hierarchies, and even community acceptance of violence.

Based on these findings, several practical steps should be considered. For local governments, integrating a gender-sensitive perspective and Social-norm awareness policy into local regulations is crucial, particularly by establishing clear mechanisms to prevent violence, improve legal aid, and expand shelters and safe houses in rural areas. For traditional leaders, reinterpreting the *belis* as an exchange of mutual respect rather than a transfer of ownership is essential. This reinterpretation could include limiting the economic burden of *belis* and actively preventing harmful practices, such as bride kidnapping, which are often justified in the name of tradition. For gender activists and civil society organizations, ongoing community education and advocacy are necessary to

challenge harmful cultural narratives, empower women to demand their rights, and ensure that cases of violence are brought to justice rather than hidden by cultural legitimacy.

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