

Perceptions of economic dependency can impede justice for women: report

by Ashlee Betteridge
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A [new report](#) from The Asia Foundation looks at the socio-economic choices women make when leaving a violent relationship, based on research in three districts of Timor-Leste. Contrary to some of the conventional wisdom, it argues that women are not necessarily financially worse-off from leaving violent relationships—though there are still significant barriers for many in doing so, and many of these barriers can be financial.

Yet the report (summarised in a blog [here](#) and executive summary [here](#)) suggests that perceptions around women's economic dependency on men are impeding justice for Timorese women making criminal complaints about the country's very high levels of violence. Courts are treating male perpetrators with impunity, often out of misplaced concern for the economic suffering a woman might face if the family's breadwinner is jailed:

“... domestic violence cases are often treated as unduly light infractions, and... in the majority of cases courts remain eager to ‘suspend’ a prison sentence or substitute it with a fine in cases where the defendant is found guilty. The perceived economic dependence of women upon their husbands and partners was clearly a factor in many of these court decisions, and both judges and prosecutors are often reluctant to send men to prison for violence because of this perception.”

Drawing on women's perspectives, the report looks more broadly at women's role in the economy and dimensions of the 'married economy', and the impacts these structures have on women's agency and options. It shows that a woman's income generation options are often closely tied to land and the home, which makes it difficult for her to leave an abusive partner. Issues of control and inequality compound this challenge. Women also face many challenges in accessing justice and services. However, from the interviews with women who had separated from a violent partner (10 of those interviewed), six felt their economic situation had actually improved, and one felt her position was similar to before—though all

remained extremely economically vulnerable.

While the report is based on a small set of interviews (18 women experiencing domestic violence were interviewed, supplemented by interviews with service providers, focus group discussions and participatory rural appraisals), and only looks at Timor-Leste, it does suggest that the assumption that women are unable to support their families post-separation needs to be challenged and further examined. The report also highlights the need for more resourcing, services and support for women looking to leave violent relationships, so they are not forced to choose between 'lose-lose' options.

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/perceptions-of-economic-dependency-can-impede-justice-for-women-report-20150727/>