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Living with Loss: Survival and Recovery among Conflict Widows in Bener Meriah, Aceh

[*]Irwan[1], Ida Hasanah[2], Fahmi Arfan[3], Fitriani[4], Septian Fatianda[5]
Muhammad Nur[6], Nur Sakiya[7], Irdan Alafanda[8]
[1-8]Universitas Serambi Mekkah, Banda Aceh, Indonesia
[*]*Corresponding Author: irwan@serambimekkah.ac.id*

Abstract

This study examines the lived experiences of widows affected by the early-2000s horizontal conflict in Timang Gajah, Bener Meriah, Aceh. While conflict research has frequently emphasized armed actors, patterns of violence, and political processes, less attention has been directed toward how violence is experienced and managed within everyday household life, particularly by widows. This article addresses that gap by focusing on how women navigated the loss of husbands, sustained family survival under conditions of insecurity, and gradually reconstructed social and economic stability. The study applies a historical approach with a qualitative descriptive design. Data were collected through field observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The main empirical material derives from narrative accounts provided by five widows. The analysis centers on three interrelated dimensions: the chronologies of loss, survival practices in everyday life, and processes of psychological recovery. The findings show that widowhood in conflict settings constitutes an extended social condition rather than a singular moment of bereavement. Uncertainty surrounding disappearance, economic instability, and fear shaped the widows' post-loss experiences. Survival was negotiated through locally available livelihoods, kinship support, and women's communal solidarity networks. Psychological recovery emerged as a gradual process grounded in relational support, everyday routines, and religious meaning-making rather than formal therapeutic intervention. These narratives demonstrate how survival and recovery are continuously negotiated within the social organization of everyday life in conflict-affected communities.

Keywords: *Widowhood; Horizontal Conflict; Survival Strategies; Trauma Recovery; Everyday Life; Aceh*

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A. Introduction

Acehnese social life within the Republic of Indonesia for roughly eight decades (1945–2025) has, for more than half of that period, unfolded under recurring conflict. This sequence began with the Aceh social revolution of 1945–1946, continued through the DI/TII episode in Aceh (1953–1962), and culminated in the long insurgency of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) from 1976 to 2005. These episodes of violence left enduring social scars and grievances that made communities more easily polarized when later

conflicts emerged. Among the most prolonged and consequential was the GAM rebellion, a movement led by Hasan Muhammad Tiro and framed as Acehnese resistance to the Government of the Republic of Indonesia. The armed struggle started in 1976, evolved through several phases, and formally ended through the peace agreement of August 2005 (Ikramatoun, Nusuary, and Amin 2019; Stange and Patock 2010; Zulfan, Ikramatoun, and Aminah 2023).

The GAM insurgency developed through three broad phases. The first phase, from 1976 to 1989, was marked by organizational consolidation through networks connected to earlier DI/TII circles and Acehnese student youth, many of whom also had family ties to DI/TII. During this early period, the movement was largely suppressed by the government, and many senior GAM figures, including Hasan Tiro, left Aceh and built organizational bases abroad. The second phase, from 1989 to 1998, saw GAM recruit and train Acehnese youth in Libya and deploy them back to Aceh as combatants against the Indonesian armed forces. The state responded by designating Aceh as a Military Operations Zone (Daerah Operasi Militer, DOM). This phase was accompanied by widespread human rights violations, particularly in what were then three main districts: Pidie, North Aceh, and East Aceh. The second phase ended after the fall of President Soeharto. The third phase, from 1998 until the 2005 peace agreement, was shaped by GAM's expanding organizational and military reach across Aceh, enabled by strong popular support and a weakened state position (Aspinall and Crouch 2003; Ikramatoun et al. 2019; Stange and Patock 2010). The government responded with intensified military operations that resulted in substantial losses of life, property, and livelihoods. This period also generated severe human rights abuses and contributed to other social conflicts as communities became divided by the larger war (Aspinall 2009).

One such development occurred in Bener Meriah and Central Aceh, where a horizontal conflict unfolded along ethnic lines. In this context, tensions emerged between Javanese and Gayo communities on one side and Acehnese communities on the other. This horizontal conflict was widely understood as being deliberately engineered to reduce GAM influence in the two districts (Jayanti 2018; Schulze 2004). The conflict was further enabled by the formation of trained and armed militia groups drawn from Javanese and Gayo communities, aimed at countering GAM's social and political reach. The consequences included attacks, expulsions, forced displacement, and serious human rights violations. A significant number of victims were men, which produced cascading social consequences, including the loss of household income, the emergence of fatherless children, and the intensified struggle of widows to pursue justice while sustaining family livelihoods (Sugiarti 2009).

Women are among the most vulnerable groups in conflict settings because they experience both physical and non-physical violence (Murphy et al. 2025).

Physical violence may include torture, sexual violence, harassment, and killing, while non-physical violence is often expressed through fear, uncertainty, and prolonged psychological distress. These burdens are rarely temporary. Women frequently remain tied to domestic responsibilities such as caregiving, childrearing, and household maintenance, even under conditions of insecurity. The weight of vulnerability becomes more acute when a husband is killed or disappears during conflict, as loss is immediately followed by economic instability, social uncertainty, and long-term psychological strain (Vesco et al. 2025).

Scholarly research on conflict, including studies situated in Aceh, has predominantly examined armed actors, patterns of violence, state responses, and political settlements. While this body of work has generated valuable structural and institutional insights, it often pays limited attention to how conflict is experienced and navigated at the level of everyday household life, particularly by widows (Autesserre 2014; Brounéus et al. 2024; Brück and Schindler 2009). Studies addressing the gendered consequences of violent conflict consistently note that widowhood produces enduring forms of vulnerability, yet widows' survival strategies remain comparatively underexamined in conflict scholarship (Buvinic et al. 2013). Emerging research further indicates that post-conflict widowhood involves distinct coping mechanisms shaped by economic necessity, social relations, and psychological adaptation (Brounéus et al. 2024). Despite these developments, empirical accounts grounded in localized conflict settings, especially within Indonesia's interior conflict zones, remain limited.

This article addresses that gap by focusing on women who lost husbands during the early-2000s horizontal conflict in Timang Gajah, Bener Meriah. Drawing on historical memories and narrated life experiences, the study asks: How did widows navigate loss, sustain household survival under insecurity, and reconstruct social and economic stability over time? By centering widows' lived experiences, the article contributes an empirically grounded understanding of survival not as an abstract concept but as a set of situated practices shaped by fear, responsibility, social networks, and constrained choices.

B. Methods

This study applies a historical approach with a qualitative descriptive design to document and interpret the lived experiences of widows affected by the early-2000s horizontal conflict in Timang Gajah, Bener Meriah. A qualitative descriptive design is particularly suitable for studies seeking to provide rich, minimally theorised accounts of lived experiences grounded in participants' own narratives (Sandelowski 2010). The analysis focuses on two linked dimensions: the chronology through which women lost their husbands during conflict, and

the practices through which they sustained family life and gradually rebuilt stability amid fear, uncertainty, and psychological distress.

Data were gathered through field observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, complemented by document review and relevant literature reading. The main empirical material derives from five widows selected as cases to provide detailed narrative accounts of loss, everyday survival, and coping after conflict. Interviews were conducted in Gampong Alam Jaya, Timang Gajah, Bener Meriah, across 1–4 July 2025. To protect confidentiality and ensure ethical presentation, all personal names are anonymized; informants are identified using initials (E, J, A, N, and D).

After data collection, materials were subjected to verification and validation to strengthen the credibility of the reconstructed chronology (Nowell et al. 2017) and to ensure consistency across narratives and supporting sources. Analysis proceeded descriptively by organizing each narrative into an ordered sequence of events and then identifying recurring patterns across cases, including livelihood efforts, reliance on family and women's solidarity networks, access to humanitarian or reintegration assistance, and everyday coping practices grounded in domestic, communal, and religious life (Braun and Clarke 2006).

C. Results and Discussion

1. Conflict Setting and Social Context of Timang Gajah

Timang Gajah is a highland subdistrict in Bener Meriah, widely associated with Gayo Arabica coffee production. The area is characterized by hilly topography at roughly 1,000–1,500 meters above sea level and covers about 98.28 km² (BPS Bener Meriah, 2023). Agriculture forms the backbone of local livelihoods, especially coffee, alongside horticulture and rubber. Basic infrastructure and public services exist, including schools and primary healthcare facilities, although access to higher education remains oriented toward the regency center.

Demographically, Timang Gajah is socially heterogeneous. The majority population is Gayo, while Javanese transmigrant communities have been present since state-sponsored transmigration during the New Order. Acehnese residents constitute a smaller minority and are often described as occupying a "middle" position within local social structure, including during periods of heightened tension. Everyday interaction among Acehnese, Gayo, and Javanese communities has typically taken place in markets, schools, and governmental activities, reflecting a routine pluralism that differs from the Acehnese coastal setting.

In the early 2000s, this plural social landscape became exposed to escalating insecurity. The horizontal conflict in Bener Meriah, including Timang Gajah, developed within the wider environment of the Aceh conflict and military

operations. Local tensions were associated with perceived inequalities in land access, state assistance, and ethnic identity, and they produced displacement, trauma, and the destruction of assets. In such a setting, ordinary households faced fear, restricted mobility, and disrupted livelihoods, conditions that formed the immediate background for the widows' experiences analyzed below.

2. Chronologies of Loss: Five Widows and the Experience of Uncertainty

Across the five cases examined in this study, widowhood emerges not merely as a consequence of violence but as an extended social condition shaped by uncertainty, fear, and constrained choices. A recurring theme in the widows' narratives concerns the distinction between loss marked by confirmed death and loss characterized by disappearance. Several informants articulated that uncertainty surrounding a husband's fate produced a deeper and more enduring form of suffering than death itself. The absence of a burial place carries religious and emotional consequences, as a grave represents not only closure but also a site for remembrance and prayer. In this sense, uncertainty functions as a sustained psychological burden rather than a temporary phase of grief.

One informant, here referred to as **E**, described how her husband was taken from their home at dawn by a group of armed men. She recalled being told that her husband was "not guilty" and that he would return shortly. However, he never came back. In the weeks that followed, family members searched without success. The informant associated the incident with suspicion surrounding the use of a motorbike by relatives, while emphasizing that her husband was an ordinary farmer rather than an armed actor. Faced with fear and economic vulnerability, she chose to remain in the area, reasoning that women with children were less likely to be targeted. Approximately one year later, she remarried and moved temporarily outside Aceh, a decision she framed as part of coping with prolonged uncertainty and grief. Years later, her child learned about the father's disappearance indirectly from peers, illustrating how the consequences of loss extend across time and reappear in unexpected moments of family life.

Another widow, referred to as **J**, recounted that her husband was taken from their home at midnight by unknown actors. The incident occurred alongside the abduction of several other villagers. While one abducted individual was later found dead, her husband remained missing. The informant described months of searching, followed by relocation to relatives' homes. Shortly after her departure, the family house was burned. This sequence of events demonstrates how widowhood may be accompanied by secondary victimization, including displacement, asset destruction, and prolonged insecurity. Loss, therefore, unfolded through successive disruptions rather than as a single traumatic episode.

A third informant, referred to as **A**, narrated the disappearance of her husband during routine economic activity. He left home to trade goods using a motorbike and never returned. Prior rumors of abductions had circulated, yet the family did not perceive themselves as directly involved in the conflict. The informant emphasized that neither GAM affiliation nor state association defined their household identity. Following the disappearance, extended family networks became central to sustaining daily life. Economic survival relied on irregular labor and kin-based support, highlighting how household resilience frequently depends on relational rather than institutional resources.

The experience of violent loss was most starkly illustrated in the account of informant **N**, whose husband was taken from the home at night and found dead the following day. The incident involved not only the killing of her husband but also violence directed at female members of the household, producing severe psychological consequences. Attempts to pursue legal recourse were described as unsuccessful. In the aftermath, the informant assumed multiple economic roles, combining professional work with agricultural labor to sustain her children. Her narrative reveals how institutional non-response may deepen vulnerability by shifting the burden of recovery entirely onto the household.

Similarly, informant **D** described the killing of her husband after the family had relocated in response to growing insecurity. At the time, her youngest child was only days old. Following the death, she assumed full responsibility for household survival through agricultural work on inherited land. The informant reported prolonged fear and trauma, including avoidance of sleeping alone for an extended period. This account reflects how the psychological consequences of violence remain embedded in everyday routines long after the immediate episode of loss.

These five narratives indicate that widowhood in conflict settings operates through overlapping layers of disruption. Uncertainty, whether through disappearance or delayed confirmation of death, constitutes a central dimension of suffering. Economic instability rapidly follows the loss of male income, compelling widows to renegotiate roles and responsibilities within the household. At the same time, fear, displacement, stigma, and limited access to justice shape the longer trajectory of survival. Widowhood, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a demographic status or a singular moment of bereavement. It represents an ongoing social condition in which survival is continuously negotiated.

The analytical significance of these narratives lies in their capacity to illuminate how violence persists beyond the immediate episode of loss. In cases of disappearance, uncertainty itself functions as a prolonged form of harm, sustaining psychological distress and complicating processes of mourning, a condition conceptualized as ambiguous loss (Boss 2002, 2006). Widowhood also

restructures household economies and gendered responsibilities, placing women at the center of survival while simultaneously narrowing their choices through fear, insecurity, and material instability. This pattern is consistent with research demonstrating that violent conflict produces enduring gendered vulnerabilities at the micro-social level (Brounéus et al. 2024; Brück and Schindler 2009; Buvinic et al. 2013). Furthermore, these narratives reveal that the consequences of violence are not limited to physical harm but extend into displacement, asset destruction, fear, and institutional silence. When justice mechanisms are inaccessible, the burden of recovery is displaced into everyday life, where households negotiate survival through informal support systems, kinship networks, and incremental livelihood adjustments rather than through formal remedies.

3. Survival Strategies in Everyday Life

The survival of widows affected by horizontal conflict in Timang Gajah was closely tied to local conditions, the availability of social support, and the policy environment surrounding them. In general, the informants described widowhood as a situation that demanded extraordinary endurance across multiple dimensions of life, including the fulfillment of basic needs, the management of stigma, and the ongoing burden of trauma. Survival, therefore, did not refer to a single economic tactic but to a broader set of practices through which women maintained household continuity while living under fear and uncertainty.

A central strategy repeatedly emphasized in the narratives is the strength of communal and gendered solidarity. The widows were not isolated individuals negotiating hardship alone. Rather, they remained embedded in a dense village social world in which women supported one another emotionally and practically, shared information, coordinated limited resources, and formed informal networks that could provide food, help with childcare, or temporary financial assistance. This form of mutual aid was described as especially meaningful in the immediate aftermath of loss, when fear and psychological instability were at their peak. In two cases, female relatives and neighbors took turns accompanying the widows at night for nearly two years, an arrangement framed not only as protection but also as care that accelerated psychological recovery while creating a sense of safety for children.

Extended family support also functioned as a primary survival resource. Although relatives were themselves economically limited, they provided temporary shelter, material support, and a sense of security that mitigated the vulnerability produced by widowhood. This kin-based safety net was particularly important in a rural setting where formal assistance was uneven and where women's mobility and employment options were constrained. In Timang Gajah, many widows continued to rely on agricultural and plantation work,

either through small-scale cultivation or wage labor in other people's gardens. Farming was described as both a livelihood and a form of continuity, allowing households to remain connected to inherited land and routine productive activity.

In addition to agriculture, the widows also turned to informal work such as petty trade, opening small kiosks, or selling daily necessities. These activities were not portrayed as stable or sufficient in themselves. Income from small-scale trade fluctuated and could not fully replace a husband's earnings. Nevertheless, such work represented a pragmatic means of maintaining daily consumption, reducing dependence on others, and keeping children in school.

Post-conflict assistance appears in the accounts as a supplementary, rather than decisive, source of support. After the 2005 peace period, one informant reported receiving humanitarian assistance from the government through the Aceh Reintegration Agency (Badan Reintegrasi Aceh, BRA) three times, each amounting to three million rupiah. Another informant described recurring support associated with GAM networks during the Meugang period, reported as 300,000–500,000 rupiah and sustained for approximately five years. In the same case, children also received educational support until completing senior secondary school. These forms of assistance contributed to economic stabilization at specific moments, yet the narratives suggest that daily survival continued to depend more heavily on household labor, kinship support, and women's communal networks than on institutional provision.

These survival practices show that recovery after conflict is not driven solely by formal reintegration programs, but by everyday social infrastructures that enable households to endure. The "how" of survival in Timang Gajah is visible in the interaction of three elements. First, livelihood strategies remained anchored in locally available work, especially agriculture and informal trading, reflecting the practical limits and possibilities of rural economies. Second, women's solidarity networks operated as an informal welfare system, translating empathy into concrete support and psychological protection. Third, assistance from formal and semi-formal actors, when available, tended to act as episodic reinforcement rather than a continuous safety net. This pattern supports scholarship highlighting that women in conflict and post-conflict settings are often positioned simultaneously as victims and survivors, whose recovery is shaped by the social organization of everyday life and by unequal access to justice and resources (Ocktaviana, Santoso, and Purwoko 2014; Wahyuningroem 2021). It also resonates with studies of female-headed households after conflict in Aceh that underline the centrality of informal coping strategies and community-based support in sustaining family life when institutional recovery is partial or delayed (Darwin, Fajarni, and Safri 2025; Pratiwi and Hirmaningsih 2017).

4. Trauma, Fear, and Gradual Processes of Recovery

Psychological recovery emerged as one of the most demanding challenges in the widows' post-loss experiences. The informants consistently described trauma not as a temporary emotional reaction but as a prolonged condition that shaped everyday routines, bodily responses, and perceptions of safety. Fear became embedded in ordinary activities, particularly those associated with nighttime vulnerability, isolation, and uncertainty. Several widows reported an inability to sleep alone for extended periods, often lasting years after the violent events. In these accounts, trauma functioned not only as an internal psychological state but as a lived social reality that reorganized domestic arrangements and interpersonal relations.

Recovery, as narrated by the informants, did not unfold through formal therapeutic intervention. Instead, it developed gradually through everyday practices rooted in kinship, communal proximity, and shared emotional support. Family members and neighboring women assumed critical roles in this process. In some cases, female relatives and close neighbors accompanied widows at night for nearly two years, offering reassurance and mitigating persistent fear. These practices were described not as structured coping strategies but as spontaneous forms of care emerging from shared vulnerability and social obligation. The presence of others, particularly fellow women, created conditions under which widows could slowly rebuild a sense of safety and emotional stability.

Religious orientation also appeared as an important element in the widows' narratives of recovery. Several informants framed endurance, patience, and acceptance through spiritual language, linking survival to faith, prayer, and moral resilience. In situations where legal resolution, institutional recognition, or material compensation were limited, religious meaning provided interpretive frameworks that rendered suffering intelligible. Spiritual practices functioned both as emotional regulation and as mechanisms for sustaining hope amid uncertainty.

Despite the centrality of informal recovery processes, the narratives also reveal the long-term persistence of trauma. Fear did not disappear abruptly. Instead, it diminished slowly, often triggered by environmental cues, memories, or renewed discussions of conflict. Psychological distress remained intertwined with economic hardship and social insecurity. The absence of justice, clarity, or acknowledgment contributed to the endurance of emotional strain, suggesting that trauma is sustained not only by memory but by structural conditions surrounding victims' lives.

These accounts illustrate that recovery after conflict cannot be understood solely through institutional or clinical frameworks. Healing unfolded within the texture of everyday social relations, where emotional support, physical presence, and shared experience operated as stabilizing forces. Such patterns are consistent

with studies of conflict-affected women showing that trauma recovery frequently relies on relational coping mechanisms rather than formal psychological services, particularly in rural and post-conflict environments (Rahmah 2017; Yurnalisa 2014). The narratives also align with scholarship emphasizing that unresolved violence and limited access to justice prolong psychological suffering, embedding trauma within daily life rather than confining it to past events (Wahyuningroem 2021). The widows' experiences therefore demonstrate that survival and recovery are inseparable processes. Economic endurance, social support, and psychological adaptation operate simultaneously rather than sequentially. Trauma recovery is negotiated through continuity, care, and gradual re-engagement with everyday life, reflecting the complex ways in which individuals and households live with the aftermath of violence.

D. Conclusion

This study has shown that widowhood produced by the early-2000s horizontal conflict in Timang Gajah cannot be reduced to a singular moment of loss. Across the five informants' narratives, widowhood emerged as a prolonged social condition shaped by uncertainty, fear, and the reorganization of household life. In cases of disappearance, the absence of certainty intensified suffering and disrupted processes of closure. In cases of confirmed death, loss initiated extended trajectories of economic vulnerability and psychological strain.

The findings also clarify how widows sustained family life under constrained conditions. Survival was negotiated through locally available livelihoods, particularly agricultural work and informal economic activities, alongside the decisive role of kinship support and women's communal solidarity. Informal networks functioned as everyday mechanisms of care, protection, and emotional stabilization in contexts where institutional support was limited or episodic. These practices reveal how household continuity after conflict often depends on social relations embedded within everyday life.

Psychological recovery emerged as inseparable from economic endurance and social support. Trauma persisted over time and was managed through gradual processes grounded in relational presence, communal care, and religious meaning-making rather than formal therapeutic intervention. These narratives highlight the enduring consequences of violence at the household level and underscore the importance of examining survival and recovery as lived, socially situated processes within conflict-affected communities.

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