

Original Article

History of Gender in Indonesia and Gender Equality

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Abstract:

This paper examines the historical development of gender relations in Indonesia and the ongoing struggle for gender equality from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary era. The study focuses on how social, cultural, political, and economic structures have shaped the roles and positions of women across different historical phases, including the pre-colonial era, colonial period, national independence, the New Order regime, and the post-Reformasi period. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a literature study method. Data were collected from books, academic journals, official reports, and historical documents relevant to gender studies in Indonesia. The collected data were analyzed through thematic and historical analysis to identify patterns of continuity and change in gender relations. The findings reveal that gender roles in pre-colonial Indonesian societies were diverse and context-dependent, with some communities granting significant authority to women. Colonialism introduced rigid patriarchal structures that limited women's public roles, while the nationalist movement reopened space for women's participation. However, the New Order regime reinforced gender domestication through state ideology. The Reformasi era marked a turning point with the emergence of gender-responsive policies and women's movements, although structural challenges such as patriarchy, gender-based violence, and unequal political representation persist. In conclusion, gender equality in Indonesia is a dynamic and ongoing process that requires sustained legal, educational, and social efforts to create a more just and inclusive society.

Keyword:

Introduction

The history of gender in Indonesia shows that relations between men and women are shaped by constantly changing social and cultural constructs, not simply biological

differences. In pre-colonial times, Indonesian society had a diverse gender system, even providing significant space for women, such as in the matrilineal system of Minangkabau and the leadership of the Sultanah in Aceh.

However, Dutch colonialism brought with it a patriarchal legal system and norms that limited women's roles in the public sphere, although it also opened up access to education, which gave rise to figures promoting gender awareness.

To this day, gender inequality remains a structural issue, evident in the division of social roles, access to education and the economy, political representation, and high levels of violence against women. This situation demonstrates that gender inequality is the result of a long historical process influenced by colonialism, state ideology, and changing political regimes. Therefore, a historical approach is crucial to understanding the roots and sustainability of gender inequality in Indonesia today.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the historical development of gender relations and gender equality in Indonesia. Data were collected through a literature review of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical documents, and official reports related to gender roles, women's movements, and state policies in Indonesia from the pre-colonial period to the post-Reformation era. The selected sources focus on key themes such as traditional gender systems, the impact of colonialism, women's participation in nationalism, state ideology during the New Order, and contemporary gender challenges. Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, involving the identification, categorization, and interpretation of recurring themes related to power relations, social roles, and gender inequality. This method enables a comprehensive understanding of how historical processes have shaped gender constructions and the ongoing struggle for gender equality in Indonesian society.

Cultural Historical Background of Gender in Indonesia

Sub 1 Gender Roles in the Pre-Colonial Period

Before the arrival of Europeans, the people of the Indonesian archipelago already had highly diverse social and cultural systems. Relations between men and women cannot be considered uniform, as each community constructed gender structures based on customary values, kinship systems, economic conditions, and spiritual beliefs. (Reid, 1988; Hadler, 2008).

a. Minangkabau

The most prominent example is the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, who adhere to a matrilineal kinship system. Descent is traced through the mother's side, making women the legal owners of family inheritances, especially customary land, which forms the foundation

of the community's economy. The position of women in this system is crucial because they ensure the continuity of customs and family continuity. Although formal leadership within the nagari structure remains held by men, women's influence in family and community decision-making processes cannot be ignored (Blackwood, 2000; Sanday, 2002). Thus, the Minangkabau system demonstrates a unique balance between male authority in the public sphere and women's power to control resources and lineages.

b. Aceh

In Aceh, gender practices even demonstrate the possibility of women occupying the highest political and spiritual positions. In the 17th century, the Aceh kingdom was ruled by a series of sultanas, including Queen Safiatuddin Tajul Alam (1641–1675). She was not merely a symbol, but a real ruler and played a role in diplomatic relations, economic development, and religious development. The presence of sultanas demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, pre-colonial Nusantara society could fully accept female leadership (Feener, 2013; Reid, 2005). This phenomenon illustrates the flexibility of gender construction, allowing women to be present not only in the domestic sphere but also as key actors in royal politics and international trade networks.

c. Bali

In Bali, the social structure demonstrates male dominance in inheritance and family leadership. However, women remain vital in supporting community life. Balinese women are crucial pillars in the implementation of Hindu rituals, which are central to social and spiritual life. Furthermore, they contribute significantly to household economic activities, from managing crops and trading in markets to supporting the costs of traditional rituals that require significant sacrifice of energy and material resources (Parker, 2003; Warren, 1993). Thus, despite men's formal dominance, Balinese women still play a crucial dual role in maintaining social, economic, and religious balance.

From these examples, it can be concluded that gender practices in the pre-colonial archipelago were highly diverse. Some societies gave women significant space in inheritance, political leadership, and spiritual activities, while others placed women in more subordinate but still vital positions. Therefore, gender relations in pre-colonial Indonesia cannot be simplified within a single patriarchal framework, but must be understood within the context of the customs, spirituality, and economic structures of each society.

2. the Impact of Colonialism on Gender Relations

The arrival of the Dutch in the 17th century brought significant changes to the social system of the Indonesian archipelago. Colonialism not only focused on political and economic control but also influenced cultural structures, including gender relations. Its impact was ambivalent: on the one hand, it restricted women's space, but on the other, it paved the way for the emergence of a sense of emancipation (Locher-Scholten, 2000; Blackburn, 2004).

One of the most significant colonial interventions occurred in the legal field. The Dutch government introduced a modern, European-style legal system, which emphasized men as heads of families. Women were subordinate to their husbands in all legal, economic, and social aspects. This meant that for communities that had previously adhered to a matrilineal system or provided substantial space for women, colonial rule introduced a new form of subordination (Locher-Scholten, 2000). Colonialism thus instilled a more rigid patriarchal structure compared to more flexible local customary practices. In addition to legal changes, colonialism also brought about transformations in the economic sphere.

The implementation of the forced cultivation system (*Cultuurstelsel*) and the development of large plantations turned women into cheap labor. They worked on However, colonialism also opened the door to the growth of new awareness. Western education, initially reserved for elite men, gradually became accessible to women.

This gave rise to important figures in the Indonesian women's movement. Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879–1904), for example, advocated the need for education for women as a path to liberation through her letters. These letters were later compiled into *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (Out of Darkness Comes Light), which inspired subsequent generations (Kartini, 1911/2005).

Other figures, such as Dewi Sartika, who founded a school for girls in Bandung in 1904, and Rohana Kudus, who founded a girls' school in West Sumatra in 1911, expanded access to education for women (Blackburn, 2004; Wieringa, 2010). These efforts marked the emergence of a collective awareness that women had the right to education and participation in the public sphere.

Sub 2 Gender Roles in Traditional Indonesian Society

1. Women in the Nationalism and Independence

Movement Women's involvement in Indonesian national history began with a collective awareness to challenge the limitations created by Dutch colonialism and patriarchal structures. This sparked the birth of various pioneering organizations, such as Putri Mardika (1912) and Aisyiyah (1917), which fought for the right to education, health care, and access to public spaces. These movements emphasized that women were not merely companions to men in the household, but citizens with equal rights and social responsibilities.

As the struggle for independence intensified, women's roles expanded into the political and military spheres, serving as armed fighters, medical personnel, and logistics couriers. These tangible contributions demonstrated that the struggle for nationalism was a collective project between men and women. Ultimately, after independence in 1945, women's political representation began to be formally recognized with the appointment of figures such as Maria Ulfah Santoso and S.K. Trimurti as ministers in the first Indonesian cabinet.

2. Normalizing Gender Roles in the New Order

Era After the 1965 political transition, the New Order era under Suharto's leadership drastically changed the direction of gender policy in Indonesia. The government introduced the concept of "State Ibuism," an ideology that limited women's roles to the domestic sphere.

Through organizations like Dharma Wanita, women were positioned as companions to their husbands and educators of their children, ensuring stable development. Their success was measured by their husbands' success, not their personal achievements.

In addition to restricting domestic roles, the state exercised strict control over women's organizations, crushing independent movements like Gerwani through stigmatization and propaganda.

3. Comparison of the Nationalism and New Order Eras

A comparison reveals a sharp contrast between the early nationalism era and the New Order era. During the national movement and early independence, women were given space to contribute significantly to the nation's struggle. They established organizations, managed education, and even held cabinet positions. Gender awareness during this period was integrated into the national project, making women's participation viewed as legitimate and essential.

Conversely, during the New Order, this space was closed. The state no longer provided ample opportunities for women to emerge as independent political actors. Through the ideology of State Ibuism, women were constructed as "supporters" of men, rather than as autonomous subjects.

In this way, the state regulated, limited, and even dictated women's roles according to the interests of development and political stability. Thus, the New Order period can be seen as a phase of decline in the history of gender in Indonesia. While the era of nationalism energized emancipation, the New Order restructured gender relations within a conservative and patriarchal framework.

Sub 3 The Role of Women in Indonesian Cultural History

1. The Post-1998 Women's Movement

The fall of the New Order regime in 1998 marked a crucial turning point in Indonesia's socio-political history and the struggle for gender equality. The Reformation era opened the floodgates of democracy and civil liberties that had been blocked for three decades, providing space for women activists to dismantle the ideology of State Ibuism. Unlike the past, which was dominated by state-established organizations like Dharma Wanita, the post-1998 period was marked by the emergence of various independent women's organizations that were more progressive and vocal in advocating for their rights.

This movement shifted the focus of the struggle to broader crucial issues, ranging from addressing gender-based violence and reproductive rights to protecting migrant workers. This shift in mindset firmly positioned women as citizens with equal political, social, and economic rights, no longer merely domestic actors. One of the most significant administrative achievements of this period was the establishment of the National Commission on Violence Against Women in 1998, which serves as an independent institution to monitor and advocate for the protection of women's rights at the national level.

2. Legislation and Contemporary Policy

Achievements The Reform Era has yielded significant legislative achievements in protecting women's rights, culminating in the enactment of Law Number 12 of 2022 concerning Criminal Acts of Sexual Violence (the TPKS Law). After nearly a decade of struggle, this law represents a legal breakthrough that broadens the definition of sexual violence, including in the online realm, and guarantees medical recovery and restitution for victims. The TPKS Law effectively fills the legal gap that the old Criminal Code has been unable to address in addressing the complexity of sexual violence cases.

In addition to legal protection, the government has also implemented a strategic policy in the form of a 30% quota for women's representation in legislative institutions to encourage political participation. Although this regulation requires political parties to provide greater space for female candidates, its implementation still faces significant challenges due to a strong patriarchal culture. This is evident in the less-than-optimal results, such as the 2019 Election, which only achieved 20.5% voter turnout, demonstrating that structural barriers still often relegate women to mere candidate lists without substantive political support.

3. Contemporary Gender Indicators

When examined through various social and political indicators, the status of Indonesian women in the contemporary era displays a duality: the balance between progress achieved and ongoing irony. Political representation has increased compared to the New Order era, but the numbers remain far from achieving parity. Levels of gender-based violence remain high, further complicated by the emergence of massive forms of violence in the digital space.

The National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) specifically notes a surge in cases each year, including new forms of violence such as the non-consensual distribution of intimate content. On the other hand, female migrant workers face extremely vulnerable conditions, particularly those working in the domestic sector in countries with weak legal frameworks. Many are victims of exploitation, violence, and

harassment, while access to justice remains severely limited (Ford & Lyons, 2013). This fact underscores that despite legal developments at the national level, efforts to protect women in a global context remain a serious concern.

4. Reformation as a Turning Point

A comparison between the Reformation and New Order periods reveals stark differences. During the New Order, women's identities were reduced to mere supporters of men through the implementation of a domestic ideology known as State Ibuism. In contrast, Reformation provided significant opportunities for freedom of association, voicing interests, and achieving more visionary and progressive regulatory advancements.

The establishment of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan), the enactment of the Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Law (TPKS), and the political quota regulations are clear evidence of institutional progress that would not have been possible without the long struggle of the women's movement. However, efforts to achieve full gender equality are far from complete.

Sub bab 4 Challenges and Gender Equality Today

1. Intersectional Dimension

Gender issues in Indonesia have now evolved beyond general discussions of inequality by adopting the concept of intersectionality. This framework recognizes that discrimination experienced by women is not a single issue, but rather the result of the interconnectedness of various identities such as ethnicity, economic status, religion, age, and physical condition. As a result, women often face layered and far more complex experiences of discrimination, depending on their social background and collective identities.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in vulnerable groups such as indigenous women who face double marginalization due to agrarian conflicts, and women with disabilities who remain hampered by less inclusive education policies. Furthermore, extreme vulnerability is also experienced by female migrant workers in the domestic sector and young activists who face gender-based violence in the digital realm. These facts emphasize the need for gender policies in Indonesia to be inclusive and intersectional so that these most marginalized groups no longer fall short of state protection.

2. Key Obstacles and Strategies for Achieving

Gender Equality Despite the advent of democracy, the realization of gender equality in Indonesia remains hampered by four key obstacles: deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, high rates of gender-based violence (including domestic violence and digital violence), the failure to consistently achieve the 30% quota for women's representation in parliament, and disparities in access to economic and digital technology for women in rural areas. These issues are structural and interconnected, requiring deeper interventions beyond formal policies,

particularly in changing the political and social culture that still dominates positions of authority for men.

To address these obstacles, a comprehensive strategy is needed, encompassing strong law enforcement through the implementation of the TPKS Law, the integration of equality values into the education curriculum, and the implementation of gender-responsive public policies (gender mainstreaming). Furthermore, women's political participation must be strengthened through leadership training and financial support to ensure that their involvement goes beyond simply fulfilling quotas and also has substantive impact. Through an integrated approach and intersectional perspective, Indonesia has significant potential to transform outdated norms toward a more just and equal society for all citizens.

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