Gender and Family in Modern Acehnese Society

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Abstract

Since it was declared as one of the crucial issues in the Sustainable Development Goals agenda by the United Nations, gender equality has entered every country including in the Acehnese family. As a province that implements Islamic law and rich in local wisdom, Aceh has its own perspective in responding to the issue of gender equality. Although in the past (in terms of religion and culture) Aceh recognized the existence of the same position between men and women in the family, in its implementation gender equality has not achieved completely. The cultural shift and understanding of Acehnese society towards gender, which is considered as an ideology from the West, has become one of the big walls in the realization of gender equality in the family. The culture of society that stigmatizes men as weak people if they are involved in domestic affairs also plays a major role. In addition, the most influential thing is the absence of gender-based education both in families and social institutions in Acehnese society, therefore the generation that grows continues to develop with the same understanding as their predecessors which resulted in the discourse of gender equality in modern Aceh society being a mere delusion.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Family, Modern, Aceh

Abstrak

Sejak dideklarasikan sebagai salah satu isu krusial dalam agenda Sustainable Development Goals oleh Persatuan Bangsa-Bangsa, kesetaraan gender telah memasuki setiap ranah kehidupan manusia termasuk dalam keluarga dan masyarakat Aceh. Sebagai provinsi yang menerapkan syariat Islam dan kaya akan budaya lokal, Aceh memiliki perspektif tersendiri dalam menanggapi isu kesetaraan gender ini. Meskipun di masa lalu (secara agama, adat dan budaya) Aceh mengakui adanya posisi yang sama antara perempuan dan laki-laki dalam keluarga, dalam penerapannya kesetaraan gender belum bisa dikatakan telah tercapai secara maksimal. Pergeseran budaya dan pemahaman masyarakat Aceh terhadap gender yang dianggap sebagai
ideologi dari Barat telah menjadi salah satu tembok besar penghalang terwujudnya kesetaraan antara perempuan dan laki-laki dalam keluarga. Budaya masyarakat yang menstigma laki-laki sebagai kaum yang lemah jika berkecimpung dalam urusan domestik juga berperan besar terhadap ketimpangan gender di Aceh. Selain itu, hal yang paling berpengaruh adalah tidak adanya pendidikan berbasis gender baik dalam keluarga maupun institusi sosial seperti sekolah dalam masyarakat Aceh, sehingga generasi yang tumbuh terus berkembang dengan pemahaman yang sama seperti pendahulu mereka yang mengakibatkan wacana kesetaraan gender dalam masyarakat modern Aceh menjadi angan-angan belaka.

Kata kunci: Kesetaraan Gender, Keluarga, Modern, Aceh

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A. Pendahuluan

Gender issues has been widely discussed among sociologist for over decades. The issues has not only taken scholars attention but also the international organizations, social workers, volunteers, and stakeholders of the nation. Since it first heard by many people in 1848 in the first women’s right movement in United State, the term of gender has been understood globally.

Nowdays, many international organizations are working to achieve the gender equality among society. The concept of gender mainstreaming was first discussed at the 1985 United Nations Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi and established as a strategy in international gender equality policy through the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the 1995 Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing. United Nation also have puted gender equality as one of the priority in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Without any doubt the gender movement continues to develop and enter every country (including Indonesia) and every element of
people's lives. The feminist movement was originally a movement of a group of western women activists, who later gradually became an academic wave in universities, including Islamic countries, through the woman studies program. Later on the women's movement has received permission from the United Nations Women's Organization with the issuance of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

In 21st century, gender movement have gained far-ranging legal rights, such as near-universal women’s suffrage and the implementation of legislation in many countries to ensure gender equal inheritance (Dilli et al, 2009: 31-57). In Indonesia, gender equality is one of the focuses of the government under the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. The institution has responsibilities to protect women and children form domestic violence and other discriminations.

In Aceh province, gender equality in public sector has shown marked improvements in these respects, it proven by having its female major of the capital city of Banda aceh in 2014. However, for all the progress that has been made, the elimination of discrimination against women has not been achieved completely especially in domestic sector, family. For instance, there is still violence against women in the family.

According to United Nation there are some problems and challenges to achieve gender equality including lack of understanding of people about the gender of equality, limited attention to neglected groups and issues, and rejection from some groups (usually happen in rural and strong culture groups) and lack of education about gender equality.
In order to find out how gender equality implemented in modern Acehnese family, the following paper will discuss about cultural aspect and gender equality, women position in modern Acehnese community, women’s and men’s roles in family, and education about gender in family. The government and world organizations has made a huge contributions toward gender equality and gave the same opportunity to every country to implement their policy in order to create equal right for both men and women to realize the SDGs, but this would never be enough unless people work together and apply the value of gender equality in their life.

**B. Women Position in Acehnese Family and Society**

History has proved that the Acehnese people are identical with Islam, and this religion is a major factor in the personal identity of the Acehnese. Apart from C. Snouck Hurgronje's statement that in legal life in the 19th century that the people of Aceh referred to adat more than Islamic law because only a few parts of customary law were influenced by religious law, which was related to religious belief and inner life, such as the family, marriage and inheritance (Saiful, 2016: 236).

History has also noted that the spread of Islam in Indonesia began in Aceh and this has brought a change in Acehnese live. The application of Islamic Sharia began to exist and develop in the kingdoms of Aceh, until its peak in the Sultanate of Iskandar Muda (1607-1636). During Iskandar Muda period, Islamic law was applied in a whole (kaффah) manner with the Mazhab Shafi'i which included the field of worship, ahwal al-syakhshiyyah (family law), mu'amalat maaliyah (civil), jinayah (Islamic criminal), uqubah (punishment), murafa'ah,
iqtishadiyah (justice), dusturiyah (legislation), akhlaqiyah (morality), and ‘alaqah dauliyah (state).

Islam has played an important role in the life of the Acehnese people, so Islam has become an Acehnese identity that cannot be separated in all aspects of their life (hukom ngon adat lage zat ngon sifeut). This is a reflection that for Acehnese people, culture and costum, including local wisdom and Islamic Sharia law are one, and cannot be separated because Acehnese culture is basically based on Islamic law from the Qur’an and Hadith (Nurdin, 2015). Although Aceh was once known as a center for the spread of Islam in Indonesia, the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh for last decades does not cover the whole aspect of live like it was, but it is still the only Indonesia province practicing sharia law officially.

Gender experience in Islam is defined primarily through the Qur’an, which is considered to be perfect, eternal, and unchanging so that its interpretation of the law will never change. One of the missions brought by Islam to mankind is to elevate the status of women and make it parallel with men’s status. Prior to the advent of Islam, there was a tradition in Jahilliyyah Arabs to bury alive the daughters (female infanticide) because they were deemed as a burden or disgrace for the family (L. John; 2001; 13).

When Islam came, this tradition was abolished, and, further, women were acknowledged as individuals who have rights, including property rights and inheritances. This indicates that Islam women has special place and treated equally as a man. However, the treatment received by women in modern world does not reflect what the Prophet
taught. Nowadays, level of violence against women in many Muslim countries have increased (Alfitri, 2014).

In Indonesia for example, a report from the National Women's Commission in the year 2019 revealed that 431,471 women experienced domestic violence, either physically or psychologically, perpetrated by their husbands.

**Figure I. Number of Women Victims of Violence form 2008 to 2019 in 2020 Annual Report**

![Diagram showing number of women victims of violence from 2008 to 2019](image)

Note: Diagram based on data from the National Women's Commission from year to year.

The diagram above shows that within 12 years, violence against women increased by 792% (almost 800%), that means violence against women in Indonesia for 12 years increased almost 8 times. In Aceh Province, based on data from the PPPA Ministry of Women and Child Protection Information System (SYMPHONY PPA), in 2015, the number of domestic violence cases in Aceh Province was 108, this number increased significantly to 453 in 2016, then it decreased slightly to 437 in 2017 and 436 cases in 2018 (Yusuf, 2019). Forms of violence that are often experienced by women are physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence.
With regard to the matter of the relationship between men and women, the basic principles of the Qur’an depict an egalitarian standpoint. In several Verses, the Qur’an clearly asserts equal status to both genders. For example: in the Al Hujurat (13),\(^1\) it is written that God has created males and females of different nationalities and ethnicities, with the purpose that they acquaint themselves with each other. Another example is in the An-Nisa (124),\(^2\) it is written that men and women will be rewarded equally by Allah in the Hereafter for whatever good deeds they conducted, as long as they have faith in Allah.

Then in surah Al-Nahl (97), Allah also mentions “Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do”\(^3\). If Allah, as the creator, has treated men and women equally, how can the created beings do differently?

In the cultural perspective of Acehnese society, women also have a special place. The position of women in Acehnese society is seen as higher because they are "masters" or people who are capable, producing, or owning. Local wisdom in Acehnese people protects and respects women from birth to grave. Protection for women in Acehnese society, for example, is expressed by putting "Cupeng" jewelry on baby girls and toddlers who also function as a cover for nakedness even though they are not dressed (Nurdin, 2015).

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\(^1\) See al-Qur’an, al-Hujurat: 13
\(^2\) See al-Qur’an, an-Nisa’: 124.
\(^3\) See Al-Qur’an, An-Nahl: 97
From a historical standpoint, Acehnese women are involved in many public fields, including matters of trade, defense and leadership. In the seventeenth century, Aceh was ruled by four sultans for 60 years. After a period of Sultanah, the people of Aceh fought against Dutch colonialism for forty years. The women also played a role as warriors and operations leaders against the Dutch, which made Acehnese women fighters such as Cut Nyak Dhien and Cut Meutia remembered by history.

As time passed the position of women in Aceh began to weaken along with cultural changes. In 1945, when Aceh became part of Indonesia, gender norms were significantly influenced by the new Indonesian state. Strong gender policies were implemented by the Indonesian Soeharto government. These gender policies, infamously known as “State Ibuism”, were implemented through programs such as Dharma Wanita and the Family Welfare Program. These policies categorised men as primary income-earners and women as childrearers and housewives (Jones, 2017).

In her article, Balawyn Jones (2017) explained that State Ibuism had real consequences in limiting the operation of matrifocal values in Aceh. By prioritising women’s roles as wives and mothers, these policies de-emphasised women’s roles as sisters and daughters, also known as matrilineal kinship structures. State Ibuism also placed greater importance on the role of the father as head of the household. As the result, women also less valuable in making decisions.

According to her, Aceh’s gender history is defined by this paradox of female (dis-)empowerment, with gender relations becoming increasingly patriarchal over time. The long-term trend
appears to be the diminishing of women’s social position through the shift in family structure away from matrifocal traditions. Although matrifocal traditions are still practiced in rural areas, there has been a decline in women’s cultural authority, particularly in urban contexts. This cultural change has affected the position of women both in the domestic sector (family) and society.

C. Gender in Family; Re-understanding the Distribution of Housework and Childcare

In modern Aceh society the role of women is often portrayed as a wife who has the responsibility of serving her husband, looking after children and caring for the house. For education as well, there are still many parents in Aceh who think education is only for men, because they are the leader of the family, while women do not need to be highly educated because even though highly educated, women end up dealing only with mattresses, wells and kitchens (kasur, dapur, sumur). This is how most of Aceh people think.⁴

There has been discrimination between men and women, both in the family, community, and country in various aspects. The socio-cultural construction has led to the sexual division of labor where women are no longer seen as being equal to men. This phenomenon has become a part of Acehnese daily lives and has become entrenched in their culture as well.

As well as caring for children. In Aceh, only women take care of children while men do not. Although the wife works, for matters of caring for children is also the wife's obligations. How could this

⁴ Interview with DA. Lecturer at Universitas Malikussaleh, Lhokseumawe. Resident in Aceh Utara, Aceh. 20 May 2020.
happen? In the culture of modern Acehnese society, taking care of the house and looking after children is not common thing for men even though it is only a small matter such as cooking, cleaning up, or doing laundry.

Culture that seems to teach that the kitchen is the work of women, making the majority of men rarely do kitchen activities. In Aceh, if there is a man who does domestic work such as helping his wife sweep, cook together in the kitchen, look after his children, or do washing, then he will be bullied by those around him because he is considered a weak man, afraid of his wife and so on (Kiram: 2020a).

If a boy who helps his mother take care of a house isn't he a filial son? And if he is a husband, isn't he a husband who loves his wife and children by being involved in household chores? So why are men involved in domestic work being stigmatized by the community so much? Barnett and Baruch (1987) show that the gap between the amount of time parents and children are home together and awake and the amount time spent in solo interaction with children is greater for men than for women.

Shelton (2006:) describe that men are at home and awake when their children are there an average of 29.4 hours per week compared to 44.45 hours for women; men spend only 5.48 hours per week in solo interaction with their children compared to 19.56 hours per week far women, regardless of the wife's employment status. This significantly larger gap between time available and time spent in solo interaction is consistent with other researchers' reports that women are more likely to be responsible for the care of children than men (Gerson, 1993). Similarly, men are more likely to be childcare "helpers," leaving women
responsible for the care of children (Ehrensaft, 1987; Brannen & Moss, 1987).

In recent decades several studies have looked into factors at the individual and household level that affect the distribution of domestic work. The available literature has identified three major factors: time availability, relative resources and gender ideology (Kil et al, 2016). Becker (1981) explains the division of housework from a rational economic perspective. He argues that families seek to maximize utility by distributing tasks as efficiently as possible. Each member must therefore specialize in what (s)he does best, paid or domestic work. A recent application of this theoretical framework is the perspective of time availability in which the distribution of housework depends on the time available to partners. The partner who spends less time on other activities such as labor force participation will have more time available to take up a larger share of the housework.

The second approach emphasizes the importance of relative resources that partners contribute to the household. Housework is considered an annoying task whose distribution is achieved as a result of negotiation. Negotiation takes the form of a power struggle: the partner who has the best negotiating position - based on material resources - may limit his or her share of the housework (Brines, 1993).

The last perspective looks into the distribution of domestic work as the result of gender ideology. From this respect, women with attitudes conforming to the ‘malebreadwinner/female carer’-ideal will perform a larger share of the household chores. Gender ideology is viewed as the result of socialization in the role that is associated with the gender category to which one belongs. An alternative theory is the
'gender construction/doing gender'-perspective. From this perspective, domestic work is a process through which individuals define their gender identity. West and Zimmerman (1987) view gender as a set of routines that are embedded in everyday interaction which must be constantly exercised and confirmed in interaction with others.

Based on Islamic teachings about the role of men and women in the household, it is not a problem if a husband helps his wife do housework. It has been narrated in Sahih Bukhari that once Hazrat Aisha was asked: “What did the Prophet (PBUH) do in his house?” She replied: "He is an ordinary human being, he is a person who does his own laundry, milkes his goats, and serves himself". (Narrated by Muhammad bin Ismail from Abdullah bin Salih, from Mu'awiyah bin Salih, from Yahya bin Salih sourced from Amrah). From this point, it can be concluded that in doing homework such as washing and cooking can be done by anyone in the family.

In Aceh modern society as it is today. The role of women not only at home but also in public spaces. Now women also work to help family needs. If most people only think that housework is a woman's work, there will be a double burden that must be borne by women, helping their husbands by making a living and taking care of the house. According to Goldscheider the revolution towards gender equality runs in two stages (Goldscheider, 2000; Goldscheider, Olah, & Puur, 2010). The first part of the gender revolution in which women enter the public sphere of education, employment and politics and the second part of the revolution in which men join the private sphere and take up their part of the responsibility for housework and childcare.
In order to achieve gender equality in family, there must be a mental revolution and a change in perspective on housework and childcare in Acehnese society because if we look at the teachings of Islam it is clearly depicted that men and women have the same position and they have the same obligations and rights towards God. The understanding that housework and childcare are women's responsibility needs to be changed.

D. Gender Education in Acehnese Modern Society

In human history the role of the education has brought a big change to human civilization. Knowledge as a change in an individual's behaviour comes from experience. With education humans gain knowledge that is applied in bringing new changes and making their lives more advanced. Education is important in human life and in this case also related to gender equality. Gender inequality starts with a lack of understanding of the basic values of gender equality.

Attitudes towards gender equality are the tendency of individuals to provide cognitive and affective and conative responses to the equality of roles and rights between men. Differences in attitudes towards gender equality vary depending on the influencing factors including knowledge about gender equality. Education on gender equality must start early so that it will provide a good understanding when children grow up. The family as the first agent of socialization in society has an important role in instilling this understanding. The application of gender equality values in the family will shape a behaviour and leads to respectful attitude between men and women.
Discussing education in gender equality is not only about women's access to education, but also about understanding the importance of gender equality itself. However, education about gender equality is still very low in Acehnese family, society, and even in school institutions (universities as exception). Most Acehnese consider gender issues as a product of western countries and cannot be applied in their lives that causes gender issues as sensitive issues to be discussed.  

Gender education should be given to children in their early ages by telling history of gender equality in Acehnese society, teaching Islamic religious values, and guiding children to practice it in the family. Cooking skills and helping take care of domestic matters also need to be trained early on boys and girls. So they do not consider that housework is only women's work, instead they would understand that it is a shared task in the family.

In the preschool period, family context and family experiences are important for gender stereotype development (McHale et al. 2003;  

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5 Interview with SN. Resident of Aceh Utara and Teacher at Senior High School. 12 May 2020.
Several, mostly U.S., studies have investigated child gender stereotypes in a family context, and demonstrated that parental gender stereotypes and the presence of siblings play an important role in the development of explicit gender stereotypes (McHale et al. 1999).

Children acquire gender stereotypes at an early age. U.S study with 10-month-old children found that at this age they can already detect gender-related categories (Levy and Haaf 1994). In the second year of life preferences for gender stereotypical toys appear, as found in a Canadian study with 12-, 18-, and 24-month-old children (Serbin et al. 2001). According to another Canadian study explicit knowledge about gender roles emerges between the ages of 2 and 3 years (Poulin-Dubois et al. 2002).

This indicate that children learn about gender equality from their family for the first time. Gender equality begins at home, and families are at the front lines of change. For the next generation, the examples set at home by parents, care-givers and extended family are shaping the way they think about gender and equality. From breaking down gender stereotypes to sharing the care work, and educating children about women’s and men’s rights and gender equality.

Family can apply the values of gender equality by sharing the care work. All this time from cooking and cleaning, to fetching water and firewood or taking care of children and the elderly, women carry out at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men. As a result, thousands of women and girls miss out on equal opportunities of going to school, or joining full-time paid work, or having enough time to rest.
By involving boys in care work and household chores from an early age, along with girls would create the same responsibilities among the family member. At the same time it would increase the awareness to help each other because there are no specific rules or dividing jobs, and at the end it would be an understanding that house work is not only for the girls but also for boys, because they share the same jobs and responsibilities.

Family also should be the place to fight stereotypes, gender is not about biological differences between the sexes, rather, it’s a social construct – people define what it means to be a boy or a girl, and these social conditionings often expect children to conform to specific and limiting gender roles and expectations from a young age. Children start absorbing stereotypes by age 3, causing the world to expand for boys and shrink for girls by age 10 (Luscombe, 2017).

Another important thing is the family should teach respect for differences. The idea that there are “standard” bodies (and consequently others that are left out, such as obese or disabled bodies) encourages discriminatory attitudes and is often rooted in childhood. It is important that the children like their own bodies, respect their friends’ bodies and understand that there is no “right” or “perfect” body. By understanding the value of gender equality (the same right for both men and women) and accepting the differences the children would come out and bring the gender equality in the family and society in general.

E. Conclusion

The gender equality program that has been promoted by the United Nation and local government has not been fully implemented
in the modern family of the Acehnese people. Although, in the past gender equality in Acehnese society showed good data, both in the domestic and public spheres, the development of the equality between women and men in the modern family has declined.

After a program from the Indonesian government (state Ibuism) began in 1945, cultural change in Acehnese society made gender equality fade away and gender relations becoming increasingly patriarchal over time. Nowdays, in Acehnese society women are still considered as wives who have to serve their husbands and do all the household obligations.

This understanding is also a barrier for women in Aceh to get a good education like most men because the community thinks that women will end up on mattresses, wells and kitchens so they do not need good education. As the result of this patriarchal system, many Acehnese women has faced domestic violence from their husbands, and has caused them less valuable in making decisions in family. As well as caring for children. In Aceh, only women take care of children while men do not. Although the wife works, for matters of caring for children is also the wife's obligations. The lack of men’s participation in distribution of housework and childcare has contributed to gender in equality in Acehnese modern society.

Another crucial issue is there is no gender education in the Acehnese family. Gender is considered as something that comes from the West and is not compatible with the culture in Acehnese society which causes gender issues to be taboo and sensitive to be discussed. Most children in Acehnese society do not get gender education in their families until they study at university (most are
compulsory subjects of the university). This phenomenon has resulted in young people having a narrow perspective on gender equality. To achieve gender equality in Acehnese society, mental change and understanding of gender issues are needed. In addition, the people of Aceh also need to re-understand and re-apply Islamic values as they have been applied in the past, so that equality between women and men in the family can be achieved.

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Daftar Pustaka


Dimensia, 4(1), 23–40.


