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Gender Bias: the Distribution of Power and Social Roles in the Minangkabau Society

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ABSTRACT

Gender bias often emerges from unequal role distribution between women and men, including in societies that are normatively regarded as gender inclusive. The Minangkabau community, widely recognized for its matrilineal kinship system, is frequently assumed to privilege women; however, empirical realities indicate persistent gender asymmetries in power and authority. This study examines how gender bias manifests within Minangkabau customary structures, particularly in relation to social roles, authority, and political participation. Employing a qualitative research design with an ethnomethodological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and critical analysis of relevant literature. Informants included traditional leaders, Minangkabau women, and authoritative written sources on customary norms and social organization in West Sumatra. The findings reveal three dominant patterns of gender bias: women exercise authority over lineage and inheritance but remain excluded from formal political power; women, symbolically revered as *Bundo Kanduang* and custodians of the *Rumah Gadang*, hold limited substantive authority; and a dualistic role structure persists within domestic life, reinforcing unequal gender expectations. The study argues that matrilineality does not automatically ensure gender equality and underscores the need for critical engagement with customary systems to promote women's substantive, rather than symbolic, participation in socio-political spaces.

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions of gender often encounter conceptual misunderstanding, as many communities continue to equate gender solely with biological distinctions between male and female. In fact, while masculinity, femininity, sex, and gender occupy related conceptual spaces, they do not share identical meanings. Margaret Mead emphasizes that gender organization does not simply reflect biological destiny but is socially and culturally produced, rendering gender a constructed category (Davies, 2018). Gender, therefore, is not determined by the physical body at birth but by socially constructed distinctions in status, roles, and functions between men and women within families and societies. As articulated in *Gender and Cultural Analytics: Finding or Making Stereotypes?* the terms "man" and "woman" refer to biological sex rather than gender. Donna Haraway further reinforces this view by defining gender as "a concept developed to resist the naturalization of sexual difference across various sites of struggle."

The conceptual distinction between sex and gender was further clarified when psychoanalyst Robert Stoller introduced the term *gender identity* in 1967. He argued that sex is rooted in biological components such as hormones, genes, the nervous system, and morphology, whereas gender is shaped by cultural dimensions, including psychology and sociology (Mandell, 2019). In this sense, gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviors, identities, and attributes deemed appropriate for men and women. This understanding distinguishes gender from sex, which is more directly associated with physical characteristics. When societies attribute unequal capacities, responsibilities, or values to men and women, such constructions give rise to gender bias.

Gender bias constitutes a compelling area of inquiry within Minangkabau society, which originates from West Sumatra but has expanded far beyond its geographical homeland. Minangkabau communities are widely dispersed across regions such as Riau, Jambi, Bengkulu, North Sumatra, and major urban centers including Jakarta, Medan, and Pekanbaru, as well as abroad in Malaysia and Singapore. This mobility is deeply embedded in Minangkabau customary traditions that encourage migration from a young age, as reflected in the proverb *"Esa hilang duo terbilang, kalau tak berhasil biar nyawa berpulang,"* which conveys the imperative to achieve success before returning home. Migrants are

also guided by the principle *"Di ma bumi dipijak, di sinan langik dijunjuang,"* emphasizing adaptation to local customs while maintaining cultural identity.

Historically, the Minangkabau have been characterized as strongly anti-colonial and as a community of highly educated, conservative Muslims. Their contribution to Indonesia's independence is well documented, as prominent national figures such as Mohammad Hatta, Sutan Syahrir, and Haji Agus Salim were of Minangkabau descent. During the period when Yogyakarta served as the capital of Indonesia (1946–1949), Dutch authorities referred to the leadership as a "Minangkabau government" due to the dominance of Minangkabau elites in diplomacy and governance. Following the Dutch occupation of Yogyakarta, Bukittinggi in West Sumatra was designated as the temporary capital of the Republic of Indonesia (Darwis, 2013). This historical trajectory underscores the political and intellectual prominence of the Minangkabau within the national narrative.

Another defining characteristic of Minangkabau society is its matrilineal system, a kinship structure that traces descent and inheritance through the maternal line. While this system places women at the center of lineage and property transmission, it does not equate to a matriarchal order in which women hold ultimate authority. Decision-making power largely remains in the hands of men, particularly in communal deliberations involving figures such as the *Mamak* (maternal uncle), *Datuak* (customary leader), and *Wali Nagari* (village authority). These male-dominated structures illustrate that matrilineality does not automatically dismantle patriarchal power relations, thereby generating structural gender bias within the community.

Several scholarly studies have critically examined gender bias in Minangkabau society, highlighting tensions between symbolic recognition and substantive power. Jennifer Krier demonstrates that although Minangkabau customs are often described as democratic and egalitarian, they paradoxically reinforce gender roles and social hierarchies through customary interpretations (Krier, 1995). Her analysis reveals that women and other subordinate groups face significant constraints in accessing formal political authority. Similarly, Afifah (2024) observes that while women control lineage and inheritance, men continue to dominate strategic roles in customary and public spheres, particularly as *mamak* and decision-makers. Collectively, these findings indicate that gender privilege in Minangkabau society remains largely symbolic rather than transformative.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at capturing ideographic social phenomena and lived realities within Minangkabau society. It employs an *ethnomethodology* approach to examine how gender roles are socially constructed and sustained, particularly the positioning of men as *Mamak* (maternal uncles) who exercise authority over inherited property, despite formal ownership being attributed to *Bundo Kanduang*. In practice, the role of *Bundo Kanduang* is largely symbolic, as women hold limited decision-making power over inheritance matters. The *ethnomethodological* framework enables an in-depth understanding of how Minangkabau society produces, interprets, and reproduces gendered meanings in everyday social interactions. Data were collected through literature review, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, following key stages of *ethnomethodological* research, namely observation, interviewing, analysis, and reporting (Rezhi et al., 2023). The fieldwork was conducted within the Minangkabau community on Jl. Bromo, Medan, with qualitative analysis emphasizing gender positioning within the Minangkabau social structure.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Gender in Minangkabau Society

Gender is not an innate attribute, but a social construct shaped by cultural norms and collective expectations (Afandi, 2019). It differs fundamentally from sex, which refers to biological characteristics that are fixed and non-transferable between men and women, such as reproductive organs and physiological functions. Gender, by contrast, is fluid and subject to change across time, place, and social context, as seen in the shifting association of masculinity with strength and rationality and femininity with gentleness and emotionality. Historically, men were expected to work in the public sphere while women were confined to domestic roles; however, contemporary social realities demonstrate that women increasingly participate in professional domains alongside men. A culturally specific illustration is found in Minangkabau marriage customs in Pariaman, where women commonly propose to men, reversing dominant norms in many other

societies. This example highlights how gender roles are culturally contingent rather than biologically determined (Puspita & Sumanti, 2023).

Gender roles in Minangkabau society frequently provoke debate and, at times, negative labeling from external perspectives. Practices such as women proposing marriage or women inheriting *harta pusaka* (ancestral property) are often criticized as undermining men's social position. These critiques contribute to the perception that men occupy a marginal role within the household, reduced primarily to symbolic leadership. Such interpretations, however, tend to oversimplify Minangkabau social structures and overlook the cultural logic underpinning them. Each society develops its own customs and value systems, and these differences constitute a distinctive cultural identity rather than a deviation from social norms (Lubis et al., 2023).

From an internal Minangkabau perspective, external assumptions about gender privilege are not always aligned with lived realities. Although women appear to hold a dominant position symbolically, gender bias in practice often continues to favor men, particularly in decision-making authority. Minangkabau customary traditions predate the arrival of Islam and are rooted in an indigenous worldview oriented toward nature, which limited the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism in the region. This worldview is encapsulated in the concept of *Alam Minangkabau* ("the Minangkabau Universe") and expressed through proverbs contained in the *tambo adat*, such as *"alam takambang jadi guru"* ("nature unfolds to be the teacher"). These expressions reflect a cultural philosophy that derives social principles from natural phenomena (Bukhari, 2009).

The distinctiveness of Minangkabau culture, often perceived as unconventional, is grounded in contextual reasoning shaped by environmental and historical conditions. Cultural practices are maintained as long as they are not considered socially harmful, reflecting a pragmatic orientation toward tradition. This principle is clearly articulated in the proverb *"Adat basandi Syarak, Syarak basandi Kitabullah,"* which affirms the harmonious integration of customary law and Islamic teachings. Rather than displacing local traditions, Islam was embraced as a moral framework that enriched Minangkabau cultural values. This synthesis illustrates the adaptive capacity of Minangkabau society in preserving tradition while accommodating religious transformation.

Within historical and social analysis, gender functions as an analytical lens for interpreting shifting power relations and social practices. Changes in the roles of men and women often generate gender bias, particularly when symbolic recognition is not matched by substantive authority. In Minangkabau society, such bias is evident in the distribution of power related to lineage, inheritance, the honorary title of *Bundo Kanduang*, and the dual roles assigned within the household. While women are highly esteemed in symbolic terms, men continue to dominate strategic and political decision-making spaces. This imbalance underscores the persistence of patriarchal authority beneath the surface of a matrilineal system.

Gender Bias in the Roles of Minangkabau Women and Men

The Minangkabau kinship system is *matrilineal*, tracing descent through the female line and positioning maternal relatives at the center of social organization. Within this system, the *mamak* (maternal uncle) plays a pivotal role, often exceeding that of the biological father, particularly in safeguarding the welfare of *kemenakan* (nieces and nephews) and managing ancestral land rights under customary law (Sanday, 2022). The core of Minangkabau matrilineality lies in the intergenerational relationship between *mamak* and *kemenakan*, where responsibility for protection, sustenance, and inheritance management is vested in the maternal uncle. An illustrative example is the allocation of the *Rumah Gadang* (traditional house) as ancestral property for women, intended to ensure their economic security and independence from husbands. This arrangement reflects a cultural mechanism that symbolically empowers women within economic and familial life (Sukmawati, 2019). The distribution of gender roles in Minangkabau customary law is illustrated in the following diagram.

In Minangkabau customary philosophy, *amanah* (trust or mandate) is regarded as a profound moral responsibility, with all material blessings viewed as accountable both in worldly life and the hereafter. Property and inheritance are not conceptualized as private ownership, as ultimate possession is believed to belong solely to Allah SWT. Customary law therefore assigns rights of ownership to women while entrusting rights of management and leadership to men. From the Minangkabau perspective, this division does not contradict Islamic law but rather complements it by balancing moral responsibility and social order (Ariani, 2015). This framework reinforces the symbolic elevation of women while simultaneously institutionalizing male authority in decision-making processes.

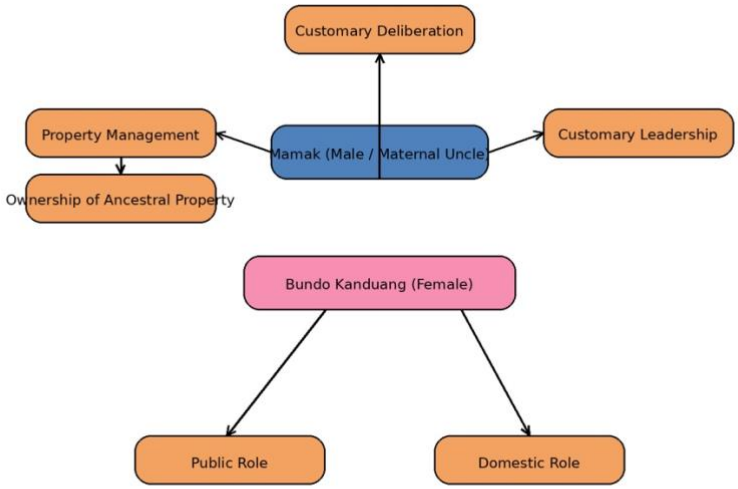

Figure 1. Diagram of the Roles of Women and Men in Minangkabau Customary Law

Islamic teachings and Minangkabau customs converge in emphasizing respect and dignity for women, particularly in matters of inheritance. *Harta pusaka* (ancestral property), regarded as communal rather than individual wealth, is therefore inherited exclusively by women and excluded from divisible acquired assets. Such property cannot be sold and may only be utilized before being passed down to subsequent generations, preserving its hereditary continuity. The transfer of *harta pusaka tinggi* traditionally occurs from the *mamak* to the *kemenakan*, encompassing assets such as *tanah ulayat* (communal land), rice fields, gardens, burial grounds, and the *Rumah Gadang* (Sabri, 2012). This inheritance logic is culturally justified by recognizing women's reproductive, domestic, and emotional labor as sacrifices that cannot be materially compensated.

From a legal-religious standpoint, Minangkabau inheritance practices are carefully differentiated and do not conflict with Islamic law. Inheritance is divided into *harta pusako rendah* (acquired property) and *harta pusako tinggi* (ancestral property), each governed by distinct legal principles. *Harta pusako rendah* is distributed according to *faraidh* under Article 171(e) of the Compilation of Islamic Law, granting sons twice the share of daughters, as it constitutes individual property of the deceased. This principle was formally affirmed during the Congress of the Minangkabau Alim Ulama, *Ninik Mamak*, and *Cerdik Pandai* on May 4–5, 1952, which established the dual inheritance system (Nova, 2021). Consequently, Minangkabau custom demonstrates a negotiated synthesis between Islamic jurisprudence and local tradition.

By contrast, *harta pusako tinggi* is not classified as inheritance under Islamic law because it belongs collectively to the *kaum* (clan) rather than to individuals. Its transmission therefore follows customary norms, whereby property is inherited collectively through the maternal line. This practice legitimizes women as primary inheritors of ancestral assets without violating Islamic principles (Prasna, 2018). A consensus between religious scholars and customary leaders was reaffirmed during the 1968 Seminar on Minangkabau Customary Law in Padang, which formally exempted *harta pusako tinggi* from Islamic inheritance law (Murniwati, 2023). This agreement institutionalized the coexistence of religious doctrine and matrilineal custom.

Despite this framework, Minangkabau women's ownership of ancestral property remains largely symbolic. Although women hold lineage rights and formal ownership of the *Rumah Gadang*, they lack authority in customary deliberations and political decision-making. Power struggles, modernization, and interethnic marriages often marginalize women further, particularly in disputes over inheritance and leadership. Customary law positions women in informal and symbolic roles, while men exercise formal authority in political decision-making and the management of *harta pusaka tinggi* (Idris, 2009). This structural imbalance reveals the persistence of gender bias beneath the matrilineal system.

Minangkabau women are closely associated with the title *Bundo Kanduang*, a revered symbol of moral authority, wisdom, and ideal womanhood. As a cultural figure, *Bundo Kanduang* is expected to provide guidance and serve as an ethical reference within the family and community. However, her role remains largely advisory, as she does not participate directly in public decision-making processes. Strategic authority and policy execution are entrusted to male customary leaders, while women are merely informed of the outcomes (Idris, 2011). This reinforces the symbolic elevation of women alongside their political marginalization.

In everyday practice, Minangkabau women do not rely solely on ancestral inheritance, particularly amid contemporary socio-economic uncertainties. Many women actively participate in income-generating activities during marriage and after divorce to sustain family livelihoods. This economic engagement creates a relative balance between men's and women's contributions, each operating within culturally defined capacities. Beyond domestic responsibilities, women often assume dual roles as income earners when household finances are insufficient. Such economic independence has become a defining characteristic of Minangkabau women, reflecting resilience and adaptive agency within a structurally gender-biased system (Almizan & Amri, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This article argues that the Minangkabau *matrilineal* kinship system does not automatically eliminate gender bias in everyday social practices and patterns of power distribution. The findings demonstrate a structural paradox in which women are symbolically positioned as custodians of lineage and inheritance, while strategic decision-making and social authority remain dominated by men, particularly the *mamak* as clan leaders and traditional elites. In this configuration, women's authority is largely confined to symbolic and cultural domains rather than institutional power. Such a condition indicates that *matrilineality* operates primarily as a system of inheritance and a marker of cultural identity. It does not, however, function as an effective mechanism for dismantling patriarchal relations embedded within customary governance structures.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to gender studies and anthropology by challenging simplified interpretations of *matrilineal* systems as inherently egalitarian. The analysis demonstrates that gender bias may persist through customary legitimacy, symbolic role allocation, and the internalization of social values that assign women domestic and cultural responsibilities without equivalent structural authority. These findings contest normative assumptions that often romanticize *matrilineality* as the antithesis of patriarchy. Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations, as its empirical scope is confined to a specific social context. Comparative analysis across regions, generations, and diverse Minangkabau communities remains limited. In addition, women's subjective perspectives could be further enriched through more intensive and prolonged ethnographic engagement.

Practically, the findings offer important implications for efforts aimed at empowering Minangkabau women within customary and social institutions. Women's empowerment cannot rely solely on the preservation of traditional symbols but must also involve the creation of substantive spaces for participation in customary deliberations, community leadership, and public decision-making arenas. A critical understanding of gender bias within customary systems may serve as a foundation for developing more gender-sensitive social and cultural education policies. Future research is therefore encouraged to examine shifts in gender roles in contemporary Minangkabau society, particularly in relation to education, urbanization, and modernization. Comparative studies with other *matrilineal* societies are also essential to deepen scholarly debates on gender bias beyond overtly patriarchal kinship systems. Ultimately, this research provides an initial framework for advancing more equitable theoretical and practical approaches to gender relations in customary communities.

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