

EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION AND SUBVERSIVE AGENCY: NEGOTIATING GENDER, FAITH, AND CULTURE AMONG CONTEMPORARY SUNDANESE WOMEN

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of gender relations among contemporary Sundanese women amid the intersecting influences of patriarchy, religion, and cultural modernity. It is grounded in the historical shift from egalitarian Sundanese values to a patriarchal system legitimized through religious interpretations. The study aims to identify women's negotiation strategies and forms of agency in reinterpreting gendered power relations. Using a feminist qualitative approach informed by feminist epistemology, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with eleven Sundanese women aged 40–55 from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. The findings show that patriarchal ideology remains deeply rooted, particularly through norms such as *nganwulaan salaki*. Yet, women exercise subversive agency by negotiating equality in education, marriage, and domestic leadership. Education and reflective religiosity serve as key drivers of epistemological transformation, shifting their consciousness from obedience toward gender equality. Thus, gender transformation among Sundanese women emerges through an internal reinterpretation of religion and tradition rather than their rejection.

Keywords: feminist epistemology, gender transformation, subversive agency, Sundanese women

Introduction

Women have become the focus of attention in many parts of the world,^{1–2} including Indonesia,³ not only in terms of their existence⁴ but also their functions, roles,⁵ and origins.⁶ The origin of women's creation has long been considered a crucial issue and is often cited as one of the underlying causes of women's oppression. Throughout human history, this discourse has been reinforced through interpretations of sacred texts.^{7–8} Beyond religious traditions, the development of Western philosophical and scientific thought historically excluded women and, at times, reduced them to negative stereotypes. Classical philosopher⁹ and later modern thinkers such as Descartes and Francis Bacon¹⁰ frequently depicted women as inferior beings, thus rendering them unfit for public life.¹¹

These religious and philosophical perspectives have shaped societal worldviews about women, contributing to discrimination and

gender inequality across generations.¹² In Indonesia, misogynistic attitudes are evident in the persistently high rates of violence against women. According to the National Commission on Violence Against Women, 330.097 cases were reported in 2024.¹³ Indonesian women also continue to face challenges related to education, child marriage,^{14–15} and polygamy.¹⁶

As one of the largest ethnic groups in Indonesia,¹⁷ Sundanese women form an essential part of the historical, cultural, and social landscape of West Java. The Sundanese possess a rich cultural heritage that has significantly shaped Indonesian civilization.¹⁸ Historically, Sunda was known as an egalitarian agrarian society. Long before contemporary gender debates, *Sunda Buhun* regarded women as equal to—or even

¹ María Jesús Domínguez Pachón and Eva López Canseco, "Women in the World and in Daily Life: Realities, Approaches, Perspectives," *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences* 161 (2014): 34–40.

² Linda K Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9–39.

³ Anke Niehof, "Indonesia's Women: Diversity and Dynamics," *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 24, no. 2 (2023): 267–83.

⁴ Mary Townsend, "Do Women Exist?," *The Hedgehog Review* 20, no. 2 (2018): 28–37.

⁵ Stephanie Hepburn and Rita J Simon, "Women's Roles and Statuses the World Over," *Gender Issues* 23 (2006): 62–68.

⁶ Fathonah K Daud and Nina Nurmila, "Asal Penciptaan Perempuan Hingga Dunia Mode Dan Praktek Ibadah: Penafsiran Ulang Tulang Bengkok Dan Mitos Menstrual Taboo," *Musawa* 21, no. 1 (2022).

⁷ Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender Perspektif Al Qur'an* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2001).

⁸ Kamila Klingorova and Tomáš Havlicek, "Religion and Gender Inequality: The Status of Women in the Societies of World Religions," *Moravian Geographical Reports Journal* 23, no. 2 (2015): 2–11.

⁹ Gadis Arivia, *Filsafat Berperspektif Feminis* (Jakarta: Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, 2003).

¹⁰ Brian Vickers, "Francis Bacon, Feminist Historiography, and the Dominion of Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1 (2008): 117–41.

¹¹ Akhyar Yusuf Lubis, *Dekonstruksi Epistemologi Modern: Dari Posmodernisme, Teori Kritis, Poskolonialisme, Hingga Cultural Studies* (Jakarta: Pustaka Indonesia Satu, 2006).

¹² Obiwuwu Chidera Rex et al., "Inequality in Religions: Discrimination against Women in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and Some Salutary Remedies," *International Journal of Current Research in Education, Culture and Society* 5, no. 1 (2021): 61–72.

¹³ Andy Yentriyani, "Menata Data, Menajamkan Arah: Refleksi Pendokumentasian Dan Tren Kasus Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan 2024" (Jakarta, 2025).

¹⁴ B.P.S., *Kemajuan Yang Tertunda: Analisis Data Perkawinan Usia Anak Di Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPS, 2015).

¹⁵ Nina Nurmila and Wiwin Windiana, "Understanding the Complexities of Child Marriage and Promoting Education to Prevent Child Marriage in Indramayu, West Java," *Ulumuna, Journal of Islamic Studies* 27, no. No 2 (2023): 823–53.

¹⁶ Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life. Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia*. (London and New York, 2009).

¹⁷ Agus Joko Pitoyo and Hari Triwahyudi, "Dinamika Perkembangan Etnis Di Indonesia Dalam Konteks Persatuan Negara," *Populasi* 25, no. 1 (2017): 64–81, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jp.32416>.

¹⁸ Sariat Arifia, Randy Van Zichem, and Arsyad Arsyad, "16th Century Sundanese Royal Trade," *International Journal of Social Service and Research* 3, no. 9 September (2023): 2173.

holding higher status than—men.¹⁹ As noted by Brata, the egalitarian character of ancient Sundanese life was reflected in its religious systems, arts, livelihoods, technologies, and *kedaton* architecture.²⁰ This egalitarian ethos is also evident in early Sundanese, a language that originally lacked hierarchical speech levels (*undak usuk basa*).²¹

However, rapid social, economic, and political transformations in recent decades have created new challenges for Sundanese women and reshaped the dynamics of contemporary gender relations. Islam, the religion adhered to by the majority of Sundanese people,²² is often interpreted literally in ways that reinforce patriarchal cultural norms.²³ This phenomenon reflects a shift in religious understanding, as early Islamic teachings elevated the status of women, countering pre-Islamic Arab traditions that treated women as inferior beings who could even be inherited or gifted. In contrast, the teachings brought by the Prophet Muhammad sought to restore women's dignity and position them as equal to men.²⁴ At its core, Islam emphasizes justice and equitable treatment for both men and women.²⁵

Given these developments, it is crucial to examine how contemporary Sundanese women experience, interpret, and negotiate gender relations across different spheres of daily life. This study explores the lived experiences of

Sundanese women and the strategies they employ to navigate gendered power structures. The research includes eleven participants from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, representing a wide spectrum of Sundanese society.

This study employs feminist methodology not merely as a qualitative tool, but as a critical epistemological stance. As Nurmila argues, feminist methodology challenges androcentric epistemology, which has historically rendered women invisible as research subjects and knowledge producers.²⁶ Feminist methodology shifts the focus from conducting sociology *about* women to conducting sociology *for* and *with* women, recognizing their lived experiences as legitimate theoretical foundations.

Building upon critical theory, feminist methodology in this research rejects the illusion of neutrality in traditional science. As Hartsock²⁷ and Harding²⁸ emphasize, *standpoint epistemology* asserts that knowledge is always partial and situated; women's perspectives, shaped by embodied and social experiences, reveal structural power asymmetries that dominant epistemologies conceal. Feminist methodology thus functions as a counter-discourse that reclaims the authority of women as “knowers” and challenges the patriarchal structures embedded in religious, cultural, and academic institutions.

¹⁹ Agus Heryana, “Mitologi Perempuan Sunda,” *Patanjala, Jurnal Penelitian Sejarah Dan Budaya* 4, no. 1 (2012).

²⁰ Yat Rospia Brata Brata and Yeni Wijayanti, “Dinamika Budaya Dan Sosial Dalam Peradaban Sunda Dilihat Dari Perspektif Sejarah,” *Jurnal Artefak* 7, no. 1 April (2020): 1–12.

²¹ Neneng Yanti Khozanatu Lahpan, “Nadoman Sebagai Ruang Negosiasi Dalam Pertemuan Islam Dan Budaya Sunda,” *Lopian: Jurnal Pengetahuan Lokal* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1–23.

²² Tata Sukayat, “The Relationship of Islamic Values and Sundaneness in Sundanese Proverbs as Da'wah Messages,” *Ilmu Dakwah: Academic Journal for Homiletic Studies* 17, no. 1 (2023): 40.

²³ Cemal Öztürk, “Revisiting the Islam-Patriarchy Nexus: Is Religious Fundamentalism the Central Cultural Barrier to Gender Equality?,” *Z Religion Ges Polit* 7 (2023): 173–206.

²⁴ Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam, from Mediaeval to Modern Time* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing Princeton, 1993).

²⁵ Muhammad Nur Khaliq et al., “Gender Equality in Islam: The Implementation of Adat Sanctions for Adultery Among the Malay Tribe in West Kalimantan,” *Humanisma: Journal of Gender Studies* 8, no. 2 (2024): 196–209.

²⁶ Nina Nurmila, “Pengaruh Budaya Patriarki Terhadap Pemahaman Agama Dan Pembentukan Budaya,” *Jurnal Karsa* 23, no. 105 (2015): 1–16.

²⁷ Nancy C M Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing The Ground for Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, 1983, 283–310.

²⁸ Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity?’,” *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 437–70.

Using a feminist critical paradigm, this research examines how patriarchal religious interpretations continue to shape everyday life while being contested and redefined through women's agency. In-depth interviews with 11 Sundanese women aged 40–55 living in West Java reveal diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, reflecting class and generational variations within Sundanese society.

Unlike earlier studies that focus on Sundanese myths (Haq;²⁹ Retty³⁰) or cultural representations in literature and performance (Narawati,³¹ Yuliawati,³² Kostarina³³), this research positions women's everyday negotiations with patriarchy as a site of epistemic resistance. By integrating critical theory and feminist analysis, it explores how contemporary Sundanese women reinterpret gendered power within education, marriage, and household leadership.

This study contributes new knowledge on gender relations among contemporary Sundanese women and provides a foundation for developing more inclusive and sustainable policies and programs. The article begins by outlining women's subordinate representation in Sundanese myths and then examines their status before and after the colonial era, which entrenched hierarchical patriarchy. This historical overview shows how societal transformation has shaped gender relations and continues to inform the experiences of Sundanese women today.

Women in Sundanese Myth

Sundanese society historically grounded its myths in religious values expressed through ceremonies, rituals, and forms of reverence (*unggah-unggal*) integrated into everyday life. These values are also embodied in *pantun* performances, which serve as ritual expressions within Sundanese tradition.

According to Rosidi, characters in Sundanese myths are imaginative figures that reflect society's ideal traits or depict characteristics considered improper within their cultural norms. Among these figures, women hold a significant place, represented by characters such as Purbasari, Dayang Sumbi, Sunan Ambu as the mother of the gods, and Nyi Sri Pohaci (Dewi Sri) as the Goddess of Rice.³⁴

Beyond portraying women as respected figures, Sundanese myths also address female biological experiences, including menstruation. In the *Sri Sadana* pantun, it is narrated that when Sri Sadana menstruated, her blood fell to the earth and from it grew various plants such as *gadung*, wheat, corn, *cetik*, and turmeric.³⁵

Wheat and corn, being staple foods for the Sundanese, are therefore symbolically traced to menstrual blood. Although many cultures regard menstruation as tabo,³⁶ impure, or even a curse as illustrated in Jewish literature cited by Umar, where menstruation is considered Eve's punishment for original sin,³⁷ the Sundanese view

²⁹ Mochamad Ziaul Haq, Penti Aprianti, and Stephanus Djunatan, "Eksistensi Perempuan Sunda Berdasarkan Dimensi Sunan Ambu Dalam Epos Lutung Kasarung," *Hanifiya, Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 6, no. 1 (2023): 13–24.

³⁰ Retty Isnendes, "Material Artifacts of Sundanese Looms with Hypogram on the Figure of Nyai Pohaci in Carita Pantun Lutung Kasarung," *Indonesia Journal of Applied Linguistics* 12, no. 3 (2023): 752–64.

³¹ Tati Narawati and Rivaldi Indra Hafidzin, "The Image of Sundanese Women in the Jaipongan Dance of Mojang Priangan," in *SHS Web Conference*, 2024, 03007.

³² Susi Yuliawati and Dian Ekawati, "Sketching Women: A Corpus Analysis of Woman Representation in

the Sundanese Magazine Manglé (1958-2019)," *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13, no. 1 (2023): 173–82.

³³ Alike Putri Kostarina and Tati Narawati, "Citra Perempuan Sunda Dalam Tari Genta Putri," in *International Seminar of Culture and Tourism AKBI*, 2025, 1.

³⁴ Ajip Rosidi, *Manusia Sunda* (Bandung: Kiblat Buku Utama, 2009).

³⁵ Ajip Rosidi, *Tjarita Sri Sadana Atau Sulandjana* (Bandung: Proyek Penelitian Pantun, 1970).

³⁶ H.R. Bhagyavathi and Santhosh Naik R, "Menstrual Taboos and Gender Violence," *Studies in Indian Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2024): 117–24.

³⁷ Nasaruddin Umar, "Teologi Menstrual: Antara Mitologi Dan Kitab Suci," *Jurnal Ulumul Qur'an* VI, no. 2 (1995).

it differently. In their belief, menstrual blood becomes a source of life for God's creatures. Tohari asserts that what appears as menstrual taboo in Sundanese culture instead creates reverence toward God as sustainer of food.³⁸

This belief inspires agricultural traditions and the veneration of Nyi Pohaci through rituals such as the Ngalaksa Ceremony and Tarawangsa performances in Rancakalong, Sumedang, as well as the Seren Taun festival in Kuningan. These rituals not only express gratitude for the harvest but also embody reverence for women.

Thus, menstruation in Sundanese mythology is not treated as something impure or shameful, but rather as a noble and life-giving force. The honored status of women is also reflected in traditional sayings such as "*Ari munjung ulah ka gunung, muja ulah ka nu bala; ari munjung kudu ka Indung, muja mah kudu ka Bapa*," which teaches that reverence should be directed foremost to one's mother and father, with "mother" placed first. Another saying, "*Indung tunggulna rabayu, Bapa catangna darajat*," further reinforces the mother as the foundation of life.

This cultural esteem is also evident in the frequent use of the term *indung* (mother) in words like *indung suku* (big toe), *indung beurang* (midwife), and *indung pare* (the first rice to ripen). The term consistently signifies a life-giving, nurturing, and protective figure, symbolizing women.

As myths function to preserve cultural values and guide human conduct, Sundanese mythology offers teachings on egalitarian gender relations and reverence for women as spiritual

beings closely connected to the Creator and the natural world. The challenge today lies in determining how deeply these values are internalized and practiced within contemporary Sundanese society.

Sundanese Society Before and After Colonization

The Sundanese were once known as a farming society. This conclusion is based on an analysis of the geomorphological conditions of the Sundanese landscape³⁹ and information on Sundanese activities found in ancient Sundanese texts such as *Carita Parahyangan*,⁴⁰ *Carita Pantun Lutung Kasarung*,⁴¹ and *Sanghyang Siksakandang Karesian*.⁴²⁻⁴³

As a farming society, the Sundanese lived a nomadic lifestyle because this dryland cultivation technique requires fertile soil, unlike rice paddies, which require flowing water. They were divided into small groups, living in scattered and autonomous settlements. Until the 19th century, this agricultural system was common in the Sundanese interior.⁴⁴ Harris (1972), as quoted by Rahardjo, stated that the social system of farming communities precluded centralized authority, as a government would not thrive if its economy relied solely on agriculture. The harvest from the fields was only sufficient to meet the needs of the population. This is one reason the Tarumanegara Kingdom could not survive long, partly because it relied solely on agriculture as a source of income. On the other hand, the Sundanese kingdom was able to develop and exist for a long

³⁸ Heri Mohamad Tohari, "Feminisme Sunda Kuno: Studi Interpretasi Kritis Akulturasi Nilai-Nilai Kesetaraan Gender Sunda-Islam Dalam Carita Pantun Sri Sadana," *Jurnal Etika Dan Pekerti* 1, no. 2 (2013): 13–26.

³⁹ Nanang Saptono, *Aktivitas Kemaritiman Masa Kerajaan Sunda* (Jakarta: Direktorat Pelestarian Cagar Budaya dan Permuseuman Dirjen Kemendikbud, 2018).

⁴⁰ Atja, *Tjarita Parahijangan Naskah Titilar Karuhun Urang Sunda Abad Ke-16 Masehi* (Bandung: Jajasan Kebudayaan Nusalarang, 1968).

⁴¹ Atja.

⁴² Saleh Danasasmata et al., *Sewaka Darma (Kropak 408)*, *Sanghyang Siksakandang Karesian (Kropak 630)*, *Amanat*

Galunggung (Kropak 632): Transkripsi Dan Terjemahan, (Sundanologi) (Bandung: Bagian Proyek Penelitian dan Pengkajian, 1987).

⁴³ This manuscript does not show the identity of the author, it only lists the year it was written, namely 1440 Saka or around 1518 AD, during the reign of Sri Baduga Maharaja (1482-1521 AD) as ruler of Pakuan Pajajaran. The manuscript was then transcribed and translated by Danasasmata et al in 1987.

⁴⁴ Edi S Ekdjati, *Kebudayaan Sunda Jilid 1* (Bandung: Pustaka Jaya, 2005).

period (10-16 centuries) because, in addition to relying on an agricultural economy, it also had maritime activities during that period.⁴⁵

The absence of power relations or colonialism among Sundanese farmers contributed to the lack of rooted patriarchal values across all levels of Sundanese society. Sundanese society is identified as egalitarian and democratic due to the use of the *Sunda Buhun* language,⁴⁶ which lacks *undak usuk basa*, or linguistic hierarchy that regulates communication within society based on age, rank, status, social class, or lineage.⁴⁷

Conditions changed when Sunda began to be annexed by Mataram.⁴⁸ During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mataram Sultanate's system and ideology dominated the island of Java, where Mataram colonized the region⁴⁹ and carried out extensive forest clearing in the northern part of Sunda.⁵⁰ This led to the development of a social system with a settled and grouped village pattern. The dryland or swidden farming pattern adopted by the Sundanese people shifted to rice farming as pressure from the rulers to encourage the Priangan farmers to settle down and work. A. de Wilde stated that compared to the rice paddy system, dryland management was considered uneconomical and did not benefit the government because it could not collect fees from farmers.⁵¹

Sumardjo described the rice paddy community as a community of workers with high solidarity, productivity, professionalism, loyalty, and a strong sense of communalism. This production pattern created a power structure that demanded hierarchy to ensure order and rejected equality. However, in reality, this hierarchical structure actually created social strata that excluded some, especially women, from the sphere of production and moved towards domestication. The resulting hierarchy placed men in a subordinate position, while women became subordinate and second-class.⁵²

The annexation of Sunda by Mataram established a feudal order that normalized patriarchy, becoming a tradition. Lubis noted that from that time on, women were used as tribute in the practice of *séba*.⁵³⁻⁵⁴ In this situation, the arrival of Islamic teachings strengthened the legitimacy of polygamy, as depicted in the *Babad Padjadjaran* and the *Sejarah Galuh*, where it is stated that King Siliwangi had 151 wives. Meanwhile, in the *Babad Limbangan*, it is stated that King Siliwangi had 100 wives.⁵⁵ Sunan Amangkurat I as Sultan of Mataram who lived a century and a half after Prabu Siliwangi is also said to have had many wives and concubines.⁵⁶

Patriarchy also influences religious interpretations and local texts. *Wawatjan Pivoelang*

⁴⁵ Supratikno Rahardjo, *Kota-Kota Prakolonial Indonesia* (Depok: FIB UI, 2007).

⁴⁶ Yayat Hendayana, "Teks Dan Konteks Dalam Jejak Budaya Takbenda Studi Kasus: Babasan Dan Paribasa Sunda," in *Seminar Nasional Arkeologi* (Bandung: Balai Arkeologi Jawa Barat, 2019), 2015–2223.

⁴⁷ Jajang A Rohmana, "Al-Qur'an Dan Pembahasalokalan Di Indonesia Superioritas Allah Sebagai Aing Dalam Tafsir Al-Qur'an Bahasa Sunda," *Subuf* 14, no. 1 (2021): 1–25.

⁴⁸ Ruhaliyah, "Jejak Penjajah Pada Naskah Sunda: Studi Kasus Pada Surat Tanah," *Jumantara: Jurnal Manuskrip Nusantara* 1, no. 1 (2010): 51.

⁴⁹ Nina Herlina Lubis, *Sejarah Tatar Sunda* (Bandung: Lembaga Penelitian Universitas Padjajaran, 2003).

⁵⁰ Kusnaka Adimiharja, *Kepemimpinan Dalam Kebudayaan Sunda* (Jakarta: Depdikbud, 1986).

⁵¹ Jan Breman, *Keuntungan Kolonial Dari Kerja Paksa: Sistem Priangan Dari Tanam Paksa Kopi Di Jawa Tahun 1720-1870* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pusa Obor Indonesia, 2014).

⁵² Jacob Sumardjo, *Arkeologi Budaya Sunda* (Yogyakarta: Qalam, 2020).

⁵³ Ari Sapto, "Pelestarian Kekuasaan Pada Masa Mataram Islam: Sebha Jaminan Loyalitas Daerah Terhadap Pusat," *Sejarah Dan Budaya: Jurnal Sejarah, Budaya Dan Pengajarannya* 9, no. 2 (2015): 153.

⁵⁴ Nina Herlina Lubis, *Kehidupan Kaum Menak Priangan 1800-1942* (Bandung: Pusat Informasi Kebudayaan Sunda, 1982).

⁵⁵ Amir Sutarga, *Prabu Siliwangi* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1984).

⁵⁶ H.J.de Graaf, *Runtuhnya Istana Mataram* (Jakarta: Grafiti Press, 1987).

Istri,⁵⁷ for example, demands that women have a sense of shame through the phrase "*almaratu bilaa haya, kattoami bilaa milbin, awewe nu teu aya kaera, cara kahadaran tiis*" (a woman without shame is like food without salt, tasteless). This phrase is often claimed to originate from the Quran or hadith, but is actually a proverb unrelated to either.

The text contains advice regarding women's obligations to their husbands: to be polite, sweet, clean, fragrant, not talk too much, respond promptly to their husbands' calls, and prioritize their husbands' needs, even willing to go into debt to entertain guests. Conversely, men are only advised to choose wives capable of managing the household, without any moral obligations to their wives. This inequality places household stability entirely as the responsibility of women, as emphasized in the phrase "*mun hayang awet laki-laki...turutkeun ulawa kaliwat*", and is legitimized as Islamic teaching through the example of Ali and Fatimah's marriage.

The construction of women as objects results in interpretations of the Quran and Hadith that are imbued with patriarchal values. Ancient Sundanese manuscripts discussing domestic life are dominated by advice on how wives should behave toward their husbands, with no counter-texts providing guidance for husbands on how to treat their wives. This patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teachings has had a powerful influence on shaping Sundanese culture and society for centuries.

Historical research shows that significant social, political, and cultural changes occurred during and after the Mataram annexation. These changes not only shifted agricultural and settlement patterns but also reconstructed power relations and gender hierarchies. Table 1 below

illustrates the transformation of Sundanese society before and after colonization.

Table 1. Transformation of Sundanese Society Before and After Colonization

Aspect	Before Colonization	After Colonization
Economic System	<i>Huma</i> farming: mobile, subsistence	<i>Sawab</i> farming: seden and taxable
Social Structure	Desentralized, egalitarian	Hierarchical, feudal (regents/eliters)
Language and Communication	Sunda Buhun (non hierachical)	<i>undak usuk basa</i> (speech hierarchy)
Cultural and Religious Ideology	Harmony, reciprocity	Patriachal interpretations of Islam
Gender Relations	Complementarity, equal	Subordination of women, patriarchy

To see the extent to which patriarchal values have become the ideology of Sundanese society, it can be seen from the gender relations of contemporary Sundanese women as shown in the research results below.

Contemporary Sundanese Women

The contemporary Sundanese women in this study are represented by 11 research subjects. They have diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from elementary school to doctoral degrees, and work in various professions, such as domestic helpers, housewives, teachers, lecturers, and entrepreneurs, ranging in age from 40 to 55. All reside in West Java and are classified as *Urang Sunda* based on self identification and recognition from their surrounding communities.⁵⁸

The following is general data from the 11 women:⁵⁹

Tabel 2. Contemporary Sundanese Women's Data

⁵⁷ Hari Waluyo, *Terjemah Dan Kajian Wawacan Pinvulang Istri* (Jakarta: Depdikbud Proyek Penelitian dan Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 1988).

⁵⁸ Suwarsih Warnaen, *Pandangan Hidup Orang Sunda Seperti Tercermin Dalam Tradisi Lisan Dan Sastra Sunda*,

Budaya Sunda (Sundanologi) (Bandung: Bagian Proyek Penelitian dan Pengkajian, 1987).

⁵⁹ For ethical reason, all participants' names are pseudonyms

Name	Age	Education	Occupation	Number of Children
Enur	40	Elementary School	Household Helper	2
Neng	40	Senior High School	Housewife	3
Eni	45	Bachelor	Kindergarten Teacher	2
Nur	49	Bachelor	Civil Servant Teacher	3
Eti	54	Doctor	Lecturer	3
Sita	50	Bachelor	Kindergarten Teacher	2
Risda	50	Doctor	Lecture	2
Ira	44	Bachelor	Housewife	2
Arti	55	Doctor	Lecturer	2
Enok	50	Doctor	Lecturer	2
Ratna	43	Bachelor	Entrepreneurship	5

The eleven women live and work in the researcher's neighborhood, allowing for direct observation and in-depth interviews. The following presentation explains the gender relations of contemporary Sundanese women and the transformations they experience.

a. Education

The data shows that contemporary Sundanese women have experienced substantial educational transformations compared to previous generations. Most of the mothers of the research subjects had low levels of education due to economic constraints and patriarchal norms that limit women's access to education. With the exception of Enok's mother, who completed her education after marriage, all the mothers only completed elementary school.

Ira's mother, for example, grew up in Central Bandung with easy access to school, but with limited family support. She only completed second grade because, as the eldest child, she had to help her parents sell at the market. Ira believes that her mother's limited education undermined her self-confidence and worldview, thus

strengthening her determination not to repeat the same mistakes.

Sita's experience reflects a similar pattern. Her parents initially rejected her desire to continue her studies, seeing her older siblings fail and believing that women did not need higher education. They believed women could simply become religious teachers or traders. Sita continued her studies without her parents' knowledge until they eventually supported her. She became the family's first university graduate, paving the way for her younger siblings to pursue higher education. Meanwhile, Enok's mother successfully completed her bachelor's degree after marriage, despite her family's initial rejection of her desire to study medicine, which was considered inappropriate for women. This experience inspired her to fully support her children's academic aspirations. With strong support from her parents and partner, Enok completed her doctorate and is now a professor.

These cases demonstrate the crucial importance of family support, such as from parents and husbands, for women's educational advancement. In a patriarchal culture, women's educational choices are rarely autonomous. The academic success of Enok, Eti, Risda, and Arti was largely made possible by the support of their parents and husbands in pursuing doctoral degrees. In a patriarchal culture, women are not completely free to choose their educational choices.⁶⁰ Enok, Eti, Risda, and Arti earned their doctorates thanks to the full support of their parents and husbands.

Nur, a civil servant teacher, faced a different challenge. She already had a bachelor's degree when she married her husband, a vocational high school graduate. Initially, he encouraged her to become a civil servant for financial stability, but objected when she planned to pursue a master's degree, fearing that his wife would surpass him academically. Nur said:

⁶⁰ Fadhilah Rizki Afriani Putri, "When Girl Become Wives: The Potrait of Underage Marriage in Indonesia,"

The Indonesian Journal of International Clinical Legal Education 2, no. 4 (2020): 463–80.

“Suami sangat mendukung saat saya mau daftar PNS tapi dia sepertinya ada rasa cemburu kepada saya, karena tidak mau kaluhuran (tidak mau istrinya lebih tinggi pendidikannya dari dia). Kan dia mah dari STM.” [My husband was very supportive when I wanted to apply for a civil servant position, but he seemed to feel jealous because he didn’t want me to surpass him (he didn’t want his wife to have a higher level of education than him). He only graduated from a vocational high school (STM)]

Nur ultimately postponed her education to avoid domestic conflict. Her husband's patriarchal views dictated that male superiority must be maintained, both in education and work. On the other hand, her husband felt no objection when his wife's work benefited the family financially through a steady salary and a civil servant pension.

Unlike Nur, Enur—a domestic worker—faced educational obstacles due to economic circumstances and a lack of parental support. After graduating from elementary school, she worked to help support her family financially. Her life experiences have made Enur a strong supporter of her children's education, as she expressed:

“mudah-mudahan barudak mah sing jalujur sakolana, ulah kaalaman ciga abdi. Terang nyalira pan padamelan abdi mah dianggapna hina, mung pembantu rumah tangga.” [I expect my children to have a better education. I have a despicable work as a housemaid, I do not want my children to be in the same situation]

Enur realized that education could change economic conditions, so she did not want her children to repeat her fate.

The transformation of women's education is inseparable from government policies related to Education for All, such as the 7-12-year compulsory education program launched by President Soeharto on May 2, 1984, which was expanded to 9 years through Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 1999, as well as follow-up policies in the following period.

b. Marriage

Transformations in marriage among contemporary Sundanese women can be seen in two main aspects: the age of first marriage and the system of spouse selection. The parents of the respondents generally married through arranged marriages before the age of 17; Ira’s mother even married at the age of 12. In contrast, the Sundanese women in this study typically married after the age of 22. Historically, early marriage was influenced by several factors: a) gender discrepancy, women are regarded not to have an important role in society so that early marriage for women is considered normal; b) economic, early marriage is seen as a solution to reduce the cost of daily necessities, especially for families with low economic conditions; c) controlling sexuality and maintaining the good name of the family, early marriage is carried out on the basis of preventing promiscuity and avoiding a bad image of the family; d) prevailing traditions and culture, such as the term spinster for women who do not get married soon.⁶¹⁻⁶² Apart from that, education is also a factor that influences the marriage decision age in addition to the state's efforts to regulate the minimum age limit for marriage, namely 16 years for women and 19 years for men as stated in Law Number 1 of 1974 and later revised in Law Number 16 of 2019 which states that marriage is permitted if a

⁶¹ Rizkia Nabila, Roswiyani Roswiyani, and Heryanti Satyadi, “A Literature Review of Factors Influencing Early Marriage Decisions in Indonesia,” *Proceedings of the 3rd Tarumanagara International Conference on the Applications of Social Sciences and Humanities (TICASH 2021)* 3rd (2021): 1393.

⁶² Stephanie R Psaki et al., “What Are the Drivers of Child Marriage? A Conceptual Framework to Guide Policies and Programs,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 69 (2021): 13–22.

man and a woman have reached the age of 19 years.

Parentally arranged marriages have shifted toward choice-based unions. Contemporary Sundanese women increasingly move away from the tradition of arranged marriages, which historically positioned them as passive participants. Wollborg (2016) notes that before the 19th century, arranged marriages among the royal and upper classes aimed to preserve economic status, political power, and offspring quality, while among lower-class workers and farmers, they served as a means to secure resources for labor and economic survival.⁶³ Dominant patriarchal culture viewed women as lacking autonomy in selecting partners, reinforcing the ideology that women must marry promptly and assume household duties, supported by religious beliefs regarding disobedience.

In practice, the matchmaking system has evolved. While traditional arrangements persist in some cases, modern forms include matchmaking agencies such as Yasco in the 1970s⁶⁴ and online dating applications like Tinder today.⁶⁵

The Sundanese women in this study engaged in monogamous marriages, consistent with Indonesian Law Number 1 of 1974, Article 1, which defines marriage as a bond between a man and a woman. Polygamy is permitted under certain legal and religious conditions, allowing a man to marry up to four wives according to Islamic jurisprudence. Most participants had been married for over 15 years, except Enur, who divorced ten years ago but later reconciled with her husband.

During the course of the marriage, discussion about polygamy was present in Eni's

family. When Eni was pregnant with her second child, her husband expressed his intention to marry another woman for religious reasons. One of the conditions for a Muslim man to be able to practice polygamy is that he must be fair. Eni conveyed her husband's opinion that in order for humans to know whether they can act fairly or not, they must prove it. Apart from that, the sustenance matters are Allah's business. Eni admitted that her heart actually felt very painful but accepted her husband's thoughts and desires to marry another woman because she believes that Islam allows polygamy. Eni's husband's plans reached the ears of Eni's mother and Eni's mother responded with great anger and said: "*hirup sorangan ge masih ripuh geus boga niat rek kawin deui*" [your own life is still difficult, but how could you plan to marry another wife]. At that time, Eni defended her husband and explained to her mother that polygamy was Islamic law and should not be opposed. Eni became a victim of the construction of a patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teachings, one of which is polygamy which is believed to be part of Islamic law.

The purpose of marriage itself is to achieve *sakinah, mawaddah wa rahmah* [tranquility, love and mercy] as stated in the Qur'an Surah ar Rum verse 21. In reality, polygamous marriages create injustice, especially towards women and children, as shown in Nurmila's research which interviewed 74 female participants involving in 39 polygamous marriages. This research, which was conducted on the island of Java, shows that the practice of polygamous marriage has created injustice towards most women and children, making it contrary to Islamic teachings. Therefore, Nurmila recommends eliminating the practice of polygamy and supports Indonesian

⁶³ Rinta Arina Manasikana and Ratna Noviani, "Peran Media Massa Dan Teknologi Dalam Transformasi Keintiman Di Indonesia," *Calatbu, Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 3, no. 1 (2021): 7–19.

⁶⁴ Patresia P Kirnandita, Mursyidatul Umamah, and Maria Cherry Ndoen, "Discourse on Taboos in Online Dating: Sexual Expressions of Jakarta Okcupid Users,"

Dialektika, Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra Dan Budaya 6, no. 2 (Desember) (2019): 106–33.

⁶⁵ Amelinda Pandu Kusumaningtyas and Azinuddin Ikram Hakim, "Jodoh Di Ujung Jempol: Tinder Sebagai Ruang Jejaring Baru," *Simulacra* 2, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21107/sml.v2i2.6147>.

feminist efforts to prohibit polygamy in Indonesia's marriage laws.⁶⁶

c. Breadwinner and Household Leader

Education, understanding of religious doctrine, and social environment significantly influence gender relations. Research findings show that three Sundanese women, Enur (a domestic worker), Eni (an honorary kindergarten teacher), and Eti (a lecturer at a private university), experienced a similar pattern: their husbands did not provide for them, but their responses differed.

Early in their marriage, Enur's husband worked in a factory but later quit and remains unemployed. Their family lives at their in-laws' house with members of her husband's extended family. This situation forced Enur to work from house to house as a housemaid while supporting both her small family and her husband's extended family. This situation demonstrates gender inequality in the form of multiple burdens: even while heavily pregnant, Enur continued to work and was still required to complete domestic chores. After five years of facing this situation, Enur chose to divorce and live independently with her two children. During the nearly ten-year separation, her husband never provided for them or paid attention to them.

Enur's reasons for remarrying her ex-husband were not related to emotional connection or improving the marital situation, but solely to the need for a guardian for her future children:

"Janten kunaon abdi kérsa rujuk ka bapakna si Énéng téh karena karunya ka barudak, soalna budak abdi duanana kan istri, mun ke nikah pasti kedah diwalian ku bapakna. Jadi daripada abdi ke hésé milari bapakna nya atos web mending ngahiji deni." [Why I remarried my ex-husband was because I was thinking about the future of my children. If they get married, they must have

marriage guardian, their father. I am worried that one day my children would have difficulty contacting their father, so I decided to remarry my ex-husband].

From the perspective of the Syafi'i mazhab which is generally adhered to by Indonesian Muslims,⁶⁷ the presence of a guardian is included in one of the conditions/pillars of marriage so that the marriage is invalid if the guardian is not present.⁶⁸ This is also stated in Indonesian marriage law. For Muslims, it is also regulated in the Compilation of Islamic Law Articles 19-23, which states that the presence of a guardian is a condition that must be fulfilled and that the person most entitled as guardian in the first place is the biological father. This is the basis for the beliefs of the Indonesian Muslim community, including Enur. In fact, in Enur's case, the biological father did not pay or even provided care and education to his biological child, a father's obligation towards his child.

However, after reconciling, her situation remained unchanged: she remained the breadwinner, lived separately from her husband, and was still required to "serve" him as a consequence of reconciliation. This burden led to frequent illness, limiting her visits to her husband (*sakasampeurna*).

Unlike Enur, Eni accepted her husband's frequent job changes (called *bejo cokor* in Sundanese) and ultimately ceased working altogether. Amid economic instability, Eni continued to work while also handling all domestic duties, including caring for her mother, who had suffered a stroke. This situation demonstrated Eni's acceptance of the teaching she understood that a wife is obligated to receive "whatever" support her husband can afford, even though in reality, Eni herself sought loans when the family's needs were not met. Eni's obedience left her with no room to negotiate personal

⁶⁶ Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life. Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia*.

⁶⁷ Fathullah Asni, "The Development of Islam and Mazhab Al-Syafi'i During the Post-Arrival of Islam in the

Malay Archipelago," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 9, no. 3 (2019): 1196–1209.

⁶⁸ Muhammad Lutfi Syarifuddin, "Tinjauan Umum Tentang Wali Nikah," *An Nuba* 5, no. 1 (2018).

needs. However, this stress and exhaustion manifested itself in aggression toward her children and mother. This aligns with Sualang's findings that negative frustration mechanisms can manifest in the form of aggression toward those closest to her who are weaker.

Meanwhile, Eti demonstrated a different dynamic. With higher education, Eti was able to negotiate religious teachings and patriarchal culture, resulting in a role exchange with her husband. Eti became the breadwinner and primary decision-maker regarding children's education, house purchases, and vehicle purchases. Her husband played a significant role in the domestic sphere. Eti's awareness grew after economic realities forced her to take over the breadwinner. She explained:

“Yang melandasi saya menjalankan pola keluarga seperti ini adalah, dulu waktu saya belum menikah pernah terbayang rumah tangga akan seperti orang tua saya dan agama juga mengajarkan bahwa pemimpin rumah tangga itu suami. Tapi ketika dijalani tahun pertama, kedua sampai 5 tahun pernikahan ternyata kondisinya tidak mendukung. Saya merasa kalau saya tidak bergerak maka akan ketinggalan. Banyak kebutuhan dasar yang tidak akan terpenuhi seperti pangan dan pendidikan. Ketika menjalankan seperti itu ternyata suami saya responnya biasa-biasa saja tidak merasa dilunjak oleh istri, malah tenang we. Semakin kesini, dia terlibat semakin nyaman, akhirnya saya semakin berlari karena anak-anak semakin besar semakin membutuhkan (materi) yang banyak.” [Before I got married, I have never imagined that I will have this type of household, which is different from that of my parents' and my religion also teach that the family leader is the husband. I have followed the tradition relation in the family for five years, but the condition was not good. If I did not change the situation, many of the basic needs such as food and education cannot be fulfilled. When I

took over breadwinning role, my husband did not respond negatively, he seems to be ok. Up until now he seems to be more comfortable with our changing roles, therefore I work harder to support my children who need more financial support].

Eti stated that if the head of the household is defined as the breadwinner and decision-maker, then she is the leader of her family. However, she rejects the term "husband leader" and prefers to describe the relationship as equal, as the role reversal occurs with the awareness and comfort of her husband. Eti feels she has more opportunities to work in the public sphere, so naturally she must switch roles with her husband, and she does not see this as a deviation.

Eti's views appear more egalitarian than those of most other Sundanese women. Despite all being highly educated and working as lecturers, Risda, Arti, and Enok still believe the husband is the head of the family. Enok, for example, stated that the public sphere and earning a living are "men's domains," but thanks to self-discipline and the support of her family and husband, she achieved the highest academic position as a professor.

In addition to role reversals like Eti's, a number of working women choose to substitute domestic work through other sources, such as domestic helpers, childcare services, laundry services, food delivery services, and daycare. However, this strategy does not eliminate the double burden and can even increase it, as domestic and caregiving responsibilities remain firmly borne by women even though they contribute to the family's income.

The belief of the majority of Muslims that the husband is the leader of the family is based on their understanding of religious texts, one of which is the following verse of the Qur'an, Surah An Nisa verse 34:⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Fadilla Dwianti Putri and Elizabeth Kristi Poerwandari, "Kontruksi Kesalehan, Posisi Dan Agensi

Perempuan Dalam Wacana Keagamaan," *Musawa* 22, no. 2 (2023): 197.

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ
وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ

Regarding the verse above, there are interpretations that are considered patriarchal, one of which is the interpretation written by Ibn Katsir (1300-1373), a great interpreter whose works are widely referred to by Muslims in the world.⁷⁰ Ibn Katsir interpreted the verse above to mean that men are women's caretakers, rulers and educators if women deviate. This, according to him, is because men are better than women.⁷¹ This interpretation shows that there is an assumption that it is as if all men are more capable of playing a role and educating women, also have more good potential, while women tend to have negative (deviant) potential. The interpretation of this verse shows that there is subordination, namely the act of excelling men and degrading women as well as stereotypes because they label women with negative characteristics.⁷² It is possible that Ibn Katsir was influenced by patriarchal culture when interpreting, so that the values raised in the interpretation are patriarchal.

The patriarchal interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an as above influences the establishment of patriarchal culture, including in Indonesia,⁷³ as can be seen from the understanding of Sundanese women in this research. In contemporary times, even though women have relatively more opportunities to access education and even jobs and positions in the public sphere, patriarchal ideology still cannot

be separated from Sundanese women. This is as expressed by Risda, a lecturer:

"Setara itu dalam konsep bekerja dan berpendidikan. Tetapi dalam hal melayani, ada hal-hal yang suami itu hanya boleh dilayani oleh istri, tidak bisa dilayani oleh yang lain, mungkin ini yang unik karena di Sunda ada istilah ngaulaan salaki." [Equal is only in the concept of work and education. However, a wife should serve her husband, not others. This is uniquely Sundanese because there is a term serving the husband].

In Sundanese culture, the term *ngawulaan salaki* (serving the husband) is known as a consequence of the belief that the husband is the leader of the family.⁷⁴⁻⁷⁵ Ira believes that this attitude of service towards her husband takes the form of taking care of two things for her husband, namely the stomach (keeping the husband from getting hungry) and the genitals (satisfying the husband's sexual needs) so that the husband does not turn to another woman (cheating), as she said:

Saya mengabdikan ke suami karena ajaran agama dan nasihat dari Bapak serta teladan dari kakak laki-laki saya. Dari kasus orang tua saya mengambil pelajaran bahwa ketika seorang istri tidak melayani suami, maka suami akan mencari dari yang lain. Ketika Mamah saya tidak melayani Bapak, Bapak mencari perempuan lain. Saya menyimpulkan ternyata keinginan suami itu dilayani. Maenya teuing suami yang diladeni istri dengan benar, berani untuk selingkuh, kamalinaan. Sedangkan kalau kita udah berusaha, ya piraku suami berpaling. Kalau sampai suami berpaling, bisa

⁷⁰ Asma Syahroni and Ahmad Nurrohm, "The Meaning of Qawwam in Q.S. An-Nisa: 34 (A Comparative Study of the Interpretations of Ibn Kathir and Al-Maraghi)," *Hamalatul Qur'an* 6, no. 1 (2025): 52–61.

⁷¹ Ibnu Katsir, "Tafsir Ibnu Katsir," Mei, 2015, <http://www.ibnukatsironline.com/2015/05/tafsir-surat-nisa-ayat-1.html>.

⁷² Aldi Nurdin, Farid Ahmad, and Eni Zulaiha, "Penafsiran Pada Ayat Al-Qur'an Yang Mengisyaratkan KDRT: Reinterpretasi Makna Al-Dharbu Pada Q.S. An-Nisa Ayat 34," *Equalita: Jurnal Studi Gender Dan Anak* 6, no. 1 (2024): 90–103.

⁷³ Erwati Aziz, Irwan Abdullah, and Zaenuddin H Prasajo, "Why Are Women Subordinated? The Misrepresentation of the Qur'an in Indonesian Discourse and Practice," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21, no. 6 (2020): 235–48.

⁷⁴ Elis Faujiah and Samsudin, "Pemikiran Dewi Sartika Pada Tahun 1904-1947 Dalam Perspektif Islam," *Al-Tsaqafa, Jurnal Ilmiah Peradaban Islam* 17, no. 2 (2020): 210.

⁷⁵ Farieda Ilhami Zulaikha and Sundari Purwaningsih, "Representasi Identitas Perempuan Dalam Ranah Domestik, Sebuah Kajian Semiotika Budaya Pada Peribahasa Sunda," *Nusa* 14, no. 3 (2019): 346.

jadi karena banyak faktor misalnya ada godaan dari perempuan lain, tapi istri punya peran yang menyebabkan suaminya selingkuh. Kan aya istilah, jangan kau abaikan dua keinginan laki-laki, perutnya dan kemaluannya.” [“I serve my husband because of religious teachings and advice from my father, and because I’ve learned from my older brother. From my parents’ experiences, I learned that when a wife doesn’t serve her husband, he will look for someone else. When my mother didn’t serve him, he looked for another woman. I concluded that a husband’s desires are fulfilled. It’s impossible for a husband who is properly served by his wife to cheat—that’s outrageous. However, if we try, a husband won’t turn away. If a husband does turn away, it could be due to many factors, such as temptation from another woman. But the wife plays a role in causing her husband to cheat. There’s a proverb that says don’t ignore a man’s two desires: his stomach and his genitals.”].

The above quote also shows that Ira blames herself if her husband cheats, even though it is her husband who should be responsible for not being able to restrain himself from cheating.

Ratna also believes in prioritizing her husband’s sexual needs, as she said:

“Berkaitan dengan hubungan suami istri, istri tidak boleh menolak. Kan ada nasihat, istri itu harus bisa menjadi pelacur bagi suami, jadi kapan pun suami mau meskipun kita sebagai istri cape, ya istri harus siap. Jadi itu adalah prinsip yang saya pegang, istri harus bisa melayani suami.” [In marital relations, a wife should not refuse. There is advice that a wife should act like a prostitute for her husband, meaning she must be ready whenever he wants, even if she is tired. This is the principle I follow: a wife must serve her husband].

This patriarchal ideology also makes Ratna believe that if the opposite situation occurs, the

husband refuses the wife’s invitation to have sexual relations, then according to her this is okay and is not a problem. There are repeated words in Ratna’s expression above, showing her strong belief in her principles. Her statement that wives must be like prostitutes for their husbands is circulating in Sundanese society, which shows the condition of a patriarchal society. This patriarchal view makes Ratna believe that sexual relations between husband and wife are only the husband’s needs and ignores her needs as a woman.

Likewise, Sita believes that a wife’s duty and obligation is to serve her husband and make him happy, whereas if a husband does something kind to his wife like what Sita’s husband did to his wife by providing warm water for her, then Sita considers that this is not a form of husband’s service, but only the husband’s kindness.

The conditions experienced by the women above confirm the subordination of women’s sexuality to the interests of men. The patriarchal ideology of Sundanese women is derived from teachings originating from their patriarchal understanding of Islamic religion. They believe that the Sundanese concept that ‘*awene*’ [women] must serve *salaki* [husband] is an Islamic religious teaching that they must implement, starting from the hadith regarding sexual relations between husband and wife.⁷⁶ This hadith was narrated by Bukhari in the book *Fath al Bari* no. 5194 as follows:

إِذَا دَعَا الرَّجُلُ امْرَأَتَهُ إِلَى فِرَاشِهِ فَأَبَتْ أَنْ تَجِيءَ لَعَنَتْهَا الْمَلَائِكَةُ حَتَّى تُصْبِحَ

"If a husband invites his wife to bed and the wife is reluctant to comply with his invitation so that the husband feels disappointed and falls asleep, then throughout the night the angels will curse the wife until dawn."

The hadith above is also used as the basis for Nur’s belief that a husband is not guilty if he refuses an invitation to sexual relations from his

⁷⁶ Rahmah Eka Saputri et al., “The Role of Women in Marital Dynamics: Hadis Interpretation of Amina Wadud’s

Hermeneutic,” *Miqot: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 48, no. 2 (2024): 282–300.

wife, because according to him there is no basis in the religion.

In contrast to the existing belief, Qibtiyah offers different interpretation to the above hadith by using two approaches: linguistic approach and *ushul fiqih* (Islamic law methodology). From linguistic approach, the word *da'a* in the above hadith means: “inviting the wife in a good manner”. This may be done by the husband by sharing house works and childcare or by giving her a favourite food or gift. The word *aba* is interpreted “to reject her husband in a bad manner”. In addition, Qibtiyah interpret “the curse of the angel” metaphorically as “uncomfortable situation” and this situation ends when the dawn prayer time come for both of them to pray, not to copulate. Thus, Qibtiyah interprets the above hadith as follows: when the husband invites the wife to have sexual relation in a good manner, but his wife rejects the invitation in a bad manner, then there will uncomfortable situation until dawn. In addition, she uses one of the principles of Islamic law methodology: *dalalah al dalalah*, which means that one law applies the same way to the person with similar characteristic. This means, if the wife invites her husband to have sexual relation in a good manner, but her husband rejects the invitation in a bad manner, then there will uncomfortable situation until dawn.⁷⁷ If we look until the end of the hadith, it is only a short time, because the words until the wife returns or until the time of Fajr comes. The word curse according to Qibtiyah, can be interpreted as “an unpleasant situation”. This can change into something normal or not a burden if both parties understand each other and are open about sexual matters.⁷⁸

d. Negotiating Gender and Agency: A Critical Feminist Perspective

The empirical findings across education, marriage, and household leadership reveal three dominant patterns of gender relations among contemporary Sundanese women, as summarized in Table 3.

Tabel 3. Patterns of Gender Relations among Contemporary Sundanese Women

Domain	Empirical Aspect	Findings
Education	Access and mobility	From mothers’ limited education (mostly elementary school) to daughters achieving doctoral degrees (Enok, Eti, Risda, Arti). Patriarchal control gradually eroded through state and family support.
Marriage and Gender Ideology	Marriage, age, power relation	Shift from arranged, early marriages (in mothers’ generation) to autonomous, delayed marriages (22+ years). Emergence of egalitarian negotiation (Eti) versus internalized patriarchy (Eni, Nur).
Economic Role and Household Leadership	Breadwinning, decision-making	Emergence of female breadwinners (Eti, Eni, Enur). Role reversal and shared leadership within the household; yet patriarchal remnants persist in serving ideology (Ratna, Ira, Nur).
Religious Interpretation	Qur’anic and hadith interpretation	From literal–patriarchal interpretation (Ibn Kathir) to feminist hermeneutics (Qibtiyah). Exposing tension between lived faith and egalitarian awareness.
Feminist Consciousness and Agency	Resistance strategies	Subversive acts, continuing education secretly (Sita), reinterpreting faith (Eti), supporting children’s education (Enur). Manifestations of “gender

⁷⁷ Alimatul Qibtiyah, “Intervensi Malaikat Dalam Hubungan Seksual,” in *Perempuan Tertindas? Kajian Hadis-Hadis Misoginis*, ed. Hamim Ilyas (Yogyakarta: eLSAQ Press, 2003), 209–227.

⁷⁸ Neng Hannah, “Seksualitas Dalam Alquran, Hadis Dan Fikih: Mengimbangi Wacana Patriarki,” *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya* 2, no. 1 (2017): 45-60.

performativity in
resistance.”

Through a feminist methodological lens, this study identifies how Sundanese women construct and negotiate gender identity within intersecting structures of patriarchy, religion, and modernity. Using critical feminist theory (Fraser,⁷⁹ Butler,⁸⁰) the data show that the transformation of Sundanese women’s subjectivity does not occur through a linear emancipation but through a dialectical process between compliance, negotiation, and resistance.

From the perspective of critical theory, women’s lived experiences reflect a habitus of patriarchy (Bourdieu)⁸¹ where social expectations regarding marriage, motherhood, and service to husbands are internalized as moral values. Yet, within this same structure, the women demonstrate subversive agency,⁸² by reconstructing their roles in ways that destabilize gender hierarchy without explicitly opposing cultural norms. For instance, Eti’s redefinition of household leadership and Sita’s secret pursuit of higher education embody everyday resistance that reclaims power in subtle, culturally acceptable ways, a phenomenon also explained by Scott’s notion of hidden transcripts.⁸³

Meanwhile, the reinterpretation of religious texts by scholars such as Alimatul Qibtiyah⁸⁴ represents a feminist hermeneutic turn that challenges patriarchal readings of Islam. Her use of ushul fiqh and linguistic analysis situates gender equality within the Qur’anic ethos of *adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion). When juxtaposed with local Sundanese cultural values

of *ngawulaan salaki*, it reveals the tension between faith-based gender ethics and patriarchal cultural internalization.

Using feminist methodology as both epistemology and praxis (Harding;⁸⁵ Nurmila⁸⁶), the findings indicate that transformation arises from women’s reflective awareness fostered through education and socio-economic participation. Education becomes an emancipatory medium through which women transition from “objects of tradition” to “subjects of knowledge production”.

This confirms that the gender transformation among Sundanese women is not merely behavioral but epistemological, a shift in how women understand, articulate, and perform their gender within local and religious contexts.

In marital contexts, negotiation is uneven. While some informants, such as Eti and Arti, establish egalitarian partnerships, others, including Nur and Ira, still adhere to patriarchal expectations, particularly regarding sexual obligations and spousal service (*ngabakti ka salaki*). This variation highlights the intersection of cultural, religious, and structural forces shaping gender relations, and underscores the necessity of situating Sundanese women’s agency within local patriarchal habitus⁸⁷ and moral internalization.

Household leadership and economic participation show similar tensions, where women’s breadwinning roles challenge symbolic male headship without directly confronting cultural or religious authority. Butler’s gender performativity⁸⁸ explains these subtle

⁷⁹ Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (2009): 97–117.

⁸⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York/London: Routledge, 1999).

⁸¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Arena Produksi Kultural: Sebuah Kajian Sosiologi Budaya* (Bantul: Kreasi Wacana, 2016).

⁸² Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

⁸³ Scott JC, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven (New Haven: CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁸⁴ Qibtiyah, “Intervensi Malaikat Dalam Hubungan Seksual.”

⁸⁵ Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity?’”

⁸⁶ Nina Nurmila, “Pengaruh Budaya Patriarki Terhadap Pemahaman Agama Dan Pembentukan Budaya,” *Jurnal Karsa* 23, no. 1 (2015).

⁸⁷ Bourdieu, *Arena Produksi Kultural: Sebuah Kajian Sosiologi Budaya*.

⁸⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

subversions, while Scott's hidden transcripts⁸⁹ clarify how resistance remains culturally legible.

Religious interpretation serves as both constraint and site of empowerment. Informants engaging with critical feminist hermeneutics, following the work of Alimatul Qibtiyah⁹⁰ reinterpret Qur'anic injunctions in ways that reconcile faith with egalitarian gender ethics. This engagement exemplifies the ongoing negotiation between 'faith-based norms' and feminist consciousness, revealing that Sundanese women's agency is exercised not in opposition to religion, but through selective reinterpretation and contextualization.

Through a feminist methodological lens, this study emphasizes women as *the knowers*: knowledge emerges from embodied, lived experience and critical reflection. This epistemic stance challenges androcentric paradigms and positions Sundanese women as both producers and interpreters of knowledge, asserting authority in domains traditionally dominated by male discourse. Consequently, gender transformation among Sundanese women is epistemological rather than purely behavioral, reflecting shifts in perception, articulation, and performance of gender across intersecting cultural, religious, and socio-economic spheres.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that gender transformation among contemporary Sundanese women is not linear or merely behavioral but epistemological, emerging from a process of critical awareness toward patriarchal structures embedded in religion and culture. Through their lived experiences, Sundanese women construct *subversive agency* that operates subtly within the domestic, educational, and spiritual spheres. Rather than rejecting tradition and religion, they reinterpret patriarchal norms as sources of moral strength, intellectual autonomy, and inner

empowerment. Education becomes the primary arena of transformation, enabling intergenerational mobility from mothers once constrained by patriarchal ideology to daughters attaining advanced academic degrees. In marriage, the shift from arranged and early unions toward self-determined partnerships indicates a growing autonomy in women's life choices, even though patriarchal narratives continue to persist through religiously sanctioned ideals such as *ngawulaan salaki* (serving the husband). Within the domestic sphere, women increasingly assume the role of economic providers and family decision-makers, redefining household leadership and challenging male authority through adaptive negotiation rather than direct confrontation.

In light of these findings, the study recommends promoting gender-just religious interpretations through feminist hermeneutics that reinterpret sacred texts as inclusive and egalitarian, fostering justice within faith traditions. Educational institutions, particularly Islamic universities, are encouraged to integrate feminist epistemology and gender perspectives into curricula to cultivate critical and reflective consciousness. Local governments and civil organizations should design empowerment programs that combine economic independence with the cultivation of self-awareness, leadership, and solidarity among women. Furthermore, revitalizing pre-patriarchal Sundanese values such as *Indung tunggul rahayu* (mother as the root of harmony) is essential to reconstructing egalitarian cultural ethics within a modern context. Future studies may extend this work by exploring how younger generations of Sundanese women negotiate gender identity in digital and public spaces, representing new forms of feminist consciousness in Indonesia's cultural transformation. Ultimately, the struggle of Sundanese women constitutes a quiet revolution

⁸⁹ JC, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*.

⁹⁰ Qibtiyah, "Intervensi Malaikat Dalam Hubungan Seksual."

an inward, epistemological movement that redefines faith, love, and obedience through the language of equality, proving that transformation often begins not with resistance against tradition, but with the courage to reinterpret it from within.

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