

## Do *Butonese* Women Need to Break the Cultural Taboos? (A Dilemma Among *Butonese* Women)

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### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis perspektif dari salah satu etnis di Indonesia terhadap pemberdayaan perempuan dan tabu budaya (pamali). Dalam penelitian ini, salah satu etnis di Indonesia yang dimaksud adalah etnis Buton. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian etnografi dengan teknik pengumpulan data menggunakan triangulasi termasuk observasi, FGD, dan wawancara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan dua perspektif yang berbeda dari dua kalangan perempuan etnis Buton. Dalam hal ini, dua kalangan perempuan etnis Buton yakni dari kalangan ibu rumah tangga dan wanita karir. Perspektif pertama, pemberdayaan perempuan dianggap sebagai pergerakan radikal. Selain itu, perspektif kedua mengklaim bahwa pemberdayaan perempuan adalah tindakan melanggar tabu budaya (pamali).

**Kata kunci:** pemberdayaan, perempuan, tabu budaya (pamali).

### Abstract

*This research aims to analyze one of Indonesian ethnicity's perspectives towards women empowerment and cultural taboos. In this context, the investigation focused on Butonese ethnic. Thus, this research employs ethnography research method. In attempt to gain the data, triangulations data collection techniques are employed including observation, FGD, and interview. The results reflected perceptions of Butonese Women from two different walk of life. In this case, the participants include housewives and career women. Butonese women proposed two different perspectives towards women empowerment. The first perspective is women empowerment considered as a radical resistance. Moreover, the second perspective claimed that women empowerment is an act of breaking the cultural taboos.*

**Keywords:** empowerment, women, cultural taboos.

### INTRODUCTION

Empowering women is the worldwide attainment towards the upliftment of society in all aspects of life. Umasankar and Mahajan (2022) pointed out that women empowerment is critical for the advancement of society. It is a multidimensional process, which obviously improve women's confidence and eligible for respectable positions. On the other words, women should take an advantage of this occasion to develop their

self-quality. In fact, empowering women is still becoming worldwide challenging concern. Several studies examining women empowerment in every aspect of life have been documented.

Many challenges emerged on women's economic empowerment. The financing gap is significant challenge for women-owned businesses. Women entrepreneurs have limited access to resources such as financing, market access, and skill development. World Bank

(2017) identified only 65% of women have a bank account while 72% of men do. In developing economies, the gap is wider at 9 percentage points. Another problem on women's economic empowerment is the impact of childcare on women's labour. Motherhood can disrupt the labour market, reduce women's working hours, or bring in family-friendly jobs, which typically pay less. Women spend significantly more time than men doing unpaid work such as housework and caring for others (ILO: 2019).

In educational context, there are some professions within the society which only women can perform, such as teaching nursery school. However, women in India are not provided with opportunities to educational access. As a result, only 65.46% of adult women are educated while 82.14% of adult men are (Shetter: 2015). In the same vein, Girls in East part of Asia have undergone educational barrier. The educational disadvantage in rural area of China is significantly higher for girls than for boys. All rural girls in high school face the greatest barriers to school enrolment (Zeng, Pang, Zhang, Medina, and Rozelle: 2013). To sum up, the involvement of socioeconomic aspect, access to study, limited time devoted to formal learning activities, and social perspectives towards girls' education are the major contributors to education gaps (White, Ruther, and Kahn: 2016).

This research is triggered to dig out the concept of women empowerment in cultural taboo context. Cultural taboo reflects values, rules, norms, and beliefs accepted by certain society (Oloko, Fakoya, and Harper: 2022). Women empowerment and cultural taboo are intertwined. It is supported by (Paul: 2019) which claimed that gender inequality and prejudice are the two pillars which the entire taboo is built. For example, in South Asian countries, women menstruation becomes cultural taboo. Women should stay at home, ignored an education and a social life since patriarchal culture believed that education interrupted a woman's menstrual cycle, hence limiting her reproductive capabilities.

This led to the concept of keeping them away from places of worship and food preparation. Another study revealed several cultural taboos that significantly shape the activities of fisherwomen in particular areas of Nigeria (Oloko, Fakoya, and Harper: 2022). Firstly, Sex is prohibited before fishing activity. This is typically linked to the holy and pure aspect of the sea goddess. Secondly, nursing a baby under three months is also barred from fishing. It is considered that 90 days are required for the woman's cleansing following childbirth. This is closely followed in order to avert the premature death of the child and the mother. Thirdly, Fisherwomen are not

allowed to carry or possess charms aboard fishing boats. In a case where the violator refuses to admit to carrying a charm and then tosses the polluted object away, the boat may capsize and cause death. Cultural taboos were obviously led to the limited access for fisherwomen in certain parts of Nigeria.

In relation to the phenomena displays formerly, further in-depth investigation on women empowerment and cultural taboo in Indonesian context is necessary. Preliminary research was conducted in one of Indonesian ethnicities namely *Butonese*. It was found that there are various cultural taboos exist for *Butonese* women. In addition, *Butonese* women were in a dilemma to maintain or break the cultural taboos. There was a statement that cultural taboo is important to maintain. At the same time, it was claimed that breaking cultural taboos are needed to compete in this era. Accordingly, this research formulates research problem namely; (1) what are *Butonese* women's perspectives towards women empowerment?

## METHOD

This is a cultural study. The researchers employ ethnography research in order to explore an in-depth understanding on *Butonese* women's perspectives towards women empowerment. Various types of ethnography research according to Sharma and Sarkar (2019) are; life history

ethnography research, confessional ethnography research, feminist ethnography research, realist ethnography research, and critical ethnography research. However, the two most common types of ethnography research namely: (1) Realist Ethnography Research. Realist ethnography research is also known as conventional ethnography research. It is employed by cultural anthropologists. It was designed by Van Maamen. This sort of research focuses on individuals rather than groups, which is why it is termed as objective cum traditional cultural ethnography study.

(2) Critical Ethnography Research. Critical ethnography research focuses on marginalized groups or persons in society. critical ethnography study exposes the researchers to a variety of crucial situations when interacting with tribes and tribal communities in order to collect meaningful information. To construct an inductive hypothesis, the researchers must be versatile in their intellectual abilities. It signifies that the inductive hypothesis considers the relationship between the observable and real situations. During the investigation, the researchers may adjust or alter the inductive hypothesis based on the situation or the researchers' perspective. Thus, ethnography research is also known as longitudinal research.

This research refers to critical ethnography research in which the researchers focused on investigating a

group of society namely *Butonese* women. In conducting this research, the researchers interacting with *Butonese* women by observing their daily life. It is important in attempt to understand *Butonese* women real activities. In addition, data collection techniques are involved FGD and in- depth interviews. These techniques are used to gain a comprehensive information about *Butonese* women's perspectives towards women empowerment.

After the data is collected, the data will be analyzed through narrative way. This data analysis technique assists the researchers to gain a rich understanding of how individuals perceive and make sense of their circumstances in ways that are both personally meaningful and culturally situated (Phoenix: 2015). In this case, the researchers concept several steps namely; (1) listening to the recorded data both from FGD and interview. In this step, the researchers transcribe it into a text. (2) identifying key statements in order to categorize it into the focus of this research. (3) describing the categorized data orderly regarding *Butonese* women's perspectives towards women empowerment.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### History of Butonese Ethnics in Sikka Regency

Local history is the study that explores events occurring within a limited geographical area. "Local" refers to a small

area, usually defined by territorial boundaries or cultural similarities. In Indonesia, local history is often referred to as regional history.

In the Western world, other terms frequently used include community history, neighborhood history, or nearby history. Local pertains to the history of a specific location, with boundaries set by the historian writing it (Abdullah, 1985). This aligns with the views of (Carrol, 2003), who highlights the importance of local history as a way to understand the past in a specific geographical context. This approach emphasizes that history is shaped not only by major events at the national or global level but also by incidents, individuals, and communities at the local scope.

Furthermore, Wasino (2009) explains that local history holds a position beneath national history. However, this does not mean that local history is always related to national history. Local history can include events related to broader historical occurrences, such as at the regional, national, or even international levels. Local history focuses on researching history from the most basic socio-geographical analytical units, such as villages, sub-districts, or districts (Bhar, 2015).

Buton, an Islamic empire (sultanate) in Nusantara, was established in the 14th century, grew and developed until the formation of the United States of the

Republic of Indonesia. The strategic Buton in the business network on the Nusantara spice line raises two simultaneously opposing opportunities. On the one hand, the abundance of business activity in Buton sea area gives surplus opportunities to grow. But, on the other hand, Buton is trapped in the intriguing interests of several powers, namely Gowa, Ternate, and the VOC, which are racing to control the shipping routes in the area. The VOC as one of the forces that plays a role in the constellation intensely establishes cooperative economic and defense relations with Buton.

As an inheritance that exists over a long period of history, Buton inherits cultural treasures manuscripts, law, art, ceremonies, crafts, and other forms of local wisdom as a result of his community's creativity in building lives while adapting to the demands of change (Munafi & Tenri: 2022). The *Butonese* ethnic group is one of four with a significant maritime culture. *Butonese* maritime culture differs slightly from that of most other ethnic groups because they are not only fishermen and sailors, but also farmers and traders (Arifin: 2015).

*Butonese* livelihood methods are carried out simultaneously by the same individual. This condition allows the *Butonese* people to thrive and travel using their ancient boats. Therefore, *Butonese* can be found in several parts of Indonesia, including East Kalimantan, Central

Sulawesi, Maluku, Riau Islands, Papua, and Nusa Tenggara. Research on the *Butonese* cultural landscape is largely done at the original place of *Butonese* people (the area of the old kingdom of Buton Sultanate in South East Sulawesi). The study on the *Butonese* cultural environment in other areas of Sulawesi is still limited, yet the number of *Butonese* in migrant area is considered large.

The *Butonese* are thought to have been in East Nusa Tenggara, specifically in Sikka Regency, since the 1926. Buton ethnicity in Sikka Regency is diversified, including *Wangi-wangi*, *Binongko*, *Tomia*, *Kaledupa*, and *Wolio*. They migrate more due to their maritime culture, which enjoys fishing, commerce, and gardening. They sailed to Sikka Regency without any purpose. According to *Butonese* traditional chief, the *Butonese* people traveled to Sikka Regency in the 1926 to trade. In this era, most of *Butonese* ethnics in Sikka Regency are traditional fishermen, with a small percentage of farmers. Fishermen only hunt for eight months per year and typically spend 13 days at sea. Traditional fishing methods include trawling nets and tiny boats powered by a machine. While in farming, they plant rice, corn, cassava, green beans, and various vegetables. Some individuals work as civil servants, including teachers in elementary, junior, and senior high schools and administrative workers in local government offices.

Based on the data from observation, it was found that *Butonese* woman's life is mostly a housewife. Every morning they wake up to prepare meals for their husband before sailing, and for their kids before they go to school. After that they went to the field to fit the plants. Then they went home to prepare lunch. They were obliged to stay at home until their husband returned from the sea. Then after that, they prepared food for dinner. *Butonese* woman's life is mostly at home. They go out only for planting in the field. Therefore, one of *Butonese* women said that it is better for my daughter to study to the higher level of education. So that her world goes wider, not only at home.

Hopefully my daughter study to the university level. So, she may become a teacher or a healthcare (D).

Based on the statement above, there is a hope from *Butonese* women to make a change in the future. The mindset and point of view about women's life is already developed. Indeed, education is the main aspect to concern in order to achieve a better future. In reality, there is still limited access for *Butonese* women to study and achieve their future goals. One of the factors in hindering *Butonese* women to develop themselves is the existence of cultural taboos. Further explanation is presented in the next section.

### ***Butonese Women's Perspectives towards Women Empowerment***

Due to the diversity and rich perspectives of this analysis, the results reflected perceptions of *Butonese* Women from two different walk of life. In this case, the participants include housewives and career women. Based on the findings, *Butonese* women defined empowerment in two different ways. The detail descriptions of each are presented below.

#### **1. Women Empowerment Indicates a Radical Resistance**

According to *Butonese* women, become weak and silent is a must. Women do not have ability to generate choices in their life. In this context, women do not have power to think, speak, and act freely. Gender inequality is normal because women do not have the same chance and power as men. For example, when their husbands ask them to become housewives, *Butonese* women must obey. This case may hinder *Butonese* women to develop their selves in economic aspect. It is in line with Sivakumar (2017), It revealed that Women in Indian societies often do not have economic independence. Therefore, women are subjected to lower household and social status. This was derived from the FGD session:

*Women must listen and do. It is forbidden for us to speak and do what we want (SR). We must obey all the rules stated by our husband because husband represents our god and parents (D).*

*Whether it is wrong or right,  
we have to obey our husband  
(H).*

The above statements indicate that the position of women among *Butonese* society is the weaker sex. For *Butonese* women, conveying ideas considered as a rude thing. This case obviously hinder *Butonese* women to make their own decision. In order to live their life, *Butonese* women just rely on the man due to the position of man is the most powerful. The critical thing in this case is the equalization role of a husband and God. It represents how sinful *Butonese* women to think, speak, and act freely. Therefore, empowering themselves becomes a radical resistance for *Butonese* women. This result indicated as a unique perception of women empowerment. It can be claimed that new literature is identified.

## **2. Women Empowerment Breaks Cultural Taboos**

There are existing cultural taboos among *Butonese* women. As pointed out by Paul (2019), in every culture there happens to be an aspect which deals with the taboo. The cultural taboos which still exist in this era for example, *Butonese* women are forbidden to leave the house when their husbands eat. One of *Butonese* women who works as a midwife claimed that this cultural taboo should be eliminated. It could be seen from below statement:

*I break this taboo because I  
have to leave my husband  
when dinner due to my night  
shift at hospital (NM).*

This indicated that *Butonese* women should break the cultural taboo in attempt to be a professional career woman. Empowering women in economic aspect is crucial. When women are more fully active in the economy, countries' economic growth increases more than at any other point in human history (Pluess, Mohapatra, Oger, Gallo, Meiers, and Fritz: 2016). In addition to this, *Butonese* women who works as a teacher stated that breaking cultural taboos is a way to empower their selves in educational aspect. For example, *Butonese* women is forbidden to be smarter than men. It is forbidden for *Butonese* women to argue men's decision. This cultural taboo obviously hinder *Butonese* women to continue their study in higher educational level. Therefore, in order to have an equal chance to develop their knowledge, *Butonese* women should be able to breaking the taboos. It was departing from the result of interview:

*Yes, I cannot obey this taboo  
because I have to enhance my  
knowledge and I must be the  
smart mom for my kids. In this  
era, knowledge is developing  
faster. I must learn everything  
continuously (MP).*

This is asserted that the more educated women, the better regeneration of society. Tran, Pham, and Nguyen (2021) Higher levels of education have

been observed to correlate with higher levels of well-being. In addition to this, Dandona (2015) pointed out that in the contemporary world, gaining knowledge leads to power and lack of knowledge for women leads to their poverty. It is clear that as an effort to have a power in society, *Butonese* women should break the existing cultural taboos.

## CONCLUSION

In regards to the results of this research, *Butonese* women proposed two different perspectives towards women empowerment. The first perspective is empowering their selves is considered as a radical resistance. Moreover, the second perspective claimed that women empowerment is an act of breaking the cultural taboos. These two different perspectives are derived from housewives and career women in *Buton* Society.

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