



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDONESIA

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INTRODUCTION TO THE COUNTRY...2
ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION...4
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS...5
REFERENCES...6

In Indonesia the researcher analyzed five existing data sets collected through more conventional researcher-driven techniques such as questionnaires, interviews, statistical sampling and observation. Using these findings to verify or disprove the presence of gender-biased treatment of men or women, the researcher concluded that girls and boys are socialized differently, but equally, in Indonesian culture. This type of analysis offers a good contrast to the type of observations gleaned from using PLA. It would be interesting to know how Indonesians within a given community perceive their own patterns of socialization and gender typing: how they think about girls and boys, and what this means in terms of the ways girls and boys grow and thrive. While outcomes of development—the relative health, economic status, and educational participation—can be examined through empirical research, it is difficult to know from this people's corresponding values, attitudes and beliefs. In an ideal world, one could pair Participatory Learning and Action with empirical studies to gain the most complete picture possible of people's lives.

Because the original study from which these following excerpts were taken was over 100 pages long, and extremely scholarly in tone, we have had to select only a small portion of the discussion (and exclude many citations) to give a flavor of the study.

Introduction to the Country

Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world, with a population approaching 200 million. The distribution of population is uneven, with 60 percent of the population occupying 7 percent of the total land area. About 60 percent of the population lives in rural areas, but the urban population is growing five times as fast as the rural population. (World Bank 1988)

For almost 30 years, Indonesia has enjoyed stable government and national leadership, building a strong platform for sustained economic growth and social development. Improved economic performance has brought improvements in other social sectors. Universal primary education has basically been accomplished. The government has launched a program striving to achieve universal access to secondary education, which will further improve the quality of human resources. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done which will require increased attention. For example, a number of nutrition goals remain matters of concern. Low birth weight, child malnutrition and maternal mortality (MMR was 425 in 1992) remain serious problems. (UNICEF 1995)

Cultural Context

Indonesia is a culturally diverse nation. There are 36 major ethnic groups and the Javanese are the largest group in Indonesia. Forty percent of the Indonesians speak Javanese at home, and 58 percent living in Java speak this language. [Bahasa Indonesia is the national language]. This study focused mostly on the Javanese values and beliefs. Since other ethnic groups were represented in the data sets, such as the Minang family from West Sumatra and the Minahasan family from North Sulawesi (only in discussing the roles of fathers in household tasks), these groups were briefly discussed. Nearly 90 percent of the population embrace the Muslim faith, while the remainder is either Protestant, Catholic, Hindu or Buddhist.

In social life, it is believed the individual should serve as a harmonious part of the family or group, and the nation. This is reflected in the national values about family; the individual is believed to belong to the family and the family is the basic unit of society.

Life in society under the Indonesian ideology should be characterized by harmonious unity (*rukun*). Harmony and unity are complemented by social hierarchy. Everyone should know his or her place and duty, honoring and respecting those in higher positions, while remaining benevolent toward, and responsible for, those in lower positions. (Mulder 1978)

However, Indonesia is undergoing rapid social changes, especially in big cities in which young people are starting to pull away from the traditional values and norms. This is reflected by the emergence of some social upheavals in Indonesia—the rise in brawls between children from different schools in Jakarta, the increase of teenage pregnancies, and the use of drugs among the youth.

The Structure of Family

The traditional Javanese family system is based on the nuclear family. Once married, a couple might live with either the husband's or the wife's family (usually the wife's family), but they live on their own as soon as they can support themselves. Kinship organization of descent is reckoned equally through father and mother. The husband is the head of the family, and the wife is the household manager, responsible for household daily activities.

Marriages in Indonesia are mostly monogamous. Even though polygamy is permitted in the Indonesian culture, it is not generally practiced. The permission to take another wife is also discouraged by the law, which requires the first wife to consent to her husband's marriage to another wife.

In the past, divorce was common in the conjugal systems of Southeast Asia. Divorce rates in Indonesia and among the Malay population of Malaysia and Singapore were traditionally the highest in the world. Arranged first marriages, and marriage at a young age (under 14 years old) accounted for high divorce rates in socially disadvantaged families. In recent years however, divorce rates have fallen dramatically and are now below the Western rates. (UN 1993)

The Status of Women

Southeast Asia has long been recognized as an area where women possess high status. Much literature has documented the favorable position of Javanese women. Hull (1982) noted that the status of women in Java appears to be ahead of that in other Asian countries. In the domestic domain, female autonomy also has been widely recognized. The Javanese believe that husband and wife should work together as a team. It was the wife, for example, who had control of family finances, and hence made many of the family decisions. In a town in central Java, Hull (1982) found that in each income category and social class, 80% of married women (n= 950) claim that it is they who keep the household income. Geertz (1961) observed that wives make most of the household decisions. They usually discuss with their husbands only major matters. "Strong-willed men may have a relationship of equal partnership with their wives, but families actually dominated by the man are exceedingly rare." (Geertz 1961, 45)

A strong network of ties between related Javanese women produces a "matrifocal" kinship system. As described by Geertz:

The woman has more authority, influence, and responsibility than her husband, and at the same time receives more affection and loyalty. The concentration of both of these features in the female role leaves the male relatively functionless in regard to the internal affairs of the nuclear family. (1961, 79)

Furthermore, equal inheritance and women's control of property give her considerable bargaining power in the family. The relatively high status and independence of women can be linked to the farming system in Indonesia. Winzeler (1982) hypothesized that when men and women are both involved equally in farming, the status of women tends to be favorable.

The only matrilineal structure is found in West Sumatra among the Minang people. The Minang are known for their matrilineal structure with descent through the mother's line. This is the rarest type of family structure found in the world. Women in this area are notable for having a high degree of power because they control the family property and inheritance. It is also the women's duty to preserve the cultural ceremony and customs.

Equal opportunity for Indonesian women to participate in development is guaranteed by the formal legal framework of the country. The Guidelines of State Policy (GBHN) of 1978, 1983, and 1988 declare that "Women, as citizens and development agents should have the same rights, responsibilities, and opportunities in all spheres of the nation's life and development activities."

Analysis of Findings and Discussion

In terms of outcome, indicators such as infant mortality rate and nutritional status (using large survey data) suggest that female children tend to be better off than male children. The precise reasons why female children have a lower infant mortality rate and better nutritional status in Indonesia, however, remain unknown. Specific behaviors possibly influencing morbidity and mortality include differential breastfeeding, affective involvement, food distribution, and attention during illness. However, these aspects did not seem to be the case in Indonesia. Some health and feeding practices cited in this report do not imply such biases. Also, findings from data analyses showed no differential treatments in favor of female children in these aspects.

Other explanations may be relevant to explain why female children were better nourished and had higher survival rates, hence, better resistance toward some diseases than male children. Stini (1969) found that the long-term effects of protein deprivation are more pronounced in males than in females. There may be some biological basis to explain this trend. Ravindran (1986) noted that male infants have an inherently greater vulnerability than female infants to many causes of death. The x-linked immuno-regulatory genes appear to contribute to a greater susceptibility to infectious diseases for males. Only when serious feeding biases in favor of males occur, such as is the case in some countries in South Asia, will the female infant mortality rate exceed that of males. Given the equal treatment received by both sexes in Indonesia, the biological advantages of females have meant that female children tend to have higher survival rates.

The relatively equal treatments between female and male children in Indonesia is supported by studies which indicated that female and male children are equally wanted. Findings from empirical data from the Javanese culture even showed a slight tendency of daughter preference, even though this finding is not conclusive. This calls for more investigation in this area. Above all, parents put high values on children regardless of the sex. Children are regarded as having sacred values that can strengthen the marriage bonds, and fulfill the psychological needs of parents.

Equal treatment of boys and girls is also reflected in the care of infants in which both sexes are well-protected and treated with great care. Children of both sexes in patrilineal society (i.e., the Javanese) tend to be treated equally in terms of receiving parental warmth, care, and discipline.

This is also reflected in some outcome indicators, such as mental intelligence, social development, and growth in which no sex-differential pattern was observed in this study.

By contrast, in matrilineal society (i.e., the Minang), girls tend to receive more discipline and less warmth than the boys. Since women in Minang culture are notable for their strong status both within the family and the society, findings of this study are surprising. This may be due to the fact that women are expected to be the safeguard of the customary law and cultural ceremonies. Therefore, girls tend to receive stricter discipline. This notion was confirmed by a personal communication conducted with an Indonesian psychologist, who was raised under the influence of Minang culture. She mentioned that as a female in this culture, one should maintain her self-respect and dignity; if she did not, she would be a disgrace for the whole family and relatives.

In terms of intelligence and creativity, the overall differences between boys and girls were not well detected. This may suggest that under equal treatment, females and males would have similar basic capabilities in intelligence and creativity. Many studies have shown that the quality of parental-child interaction is the most influential factor in determining child outcome. (Belsky 1984; Zeitlin et al. 1990) This study showed that overall patterns of parental-child interaction were relatively the same for both sexes, which was probably why a sex-differential in the mental intelligence score was not detected.

Based on the literature reviewed, clear distinctions between the roles of male and female children in some household chores are not well detected. It should be kept in mind, however, that these findings were based on small descriptive anthropological studies, making generalization an issue.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study seems to prove again the widely accepted notion about the high status of women in Southeast Asia. This high status seems to be shaped and reflected in the girl child's early experience. The absence of sex discrimination in Indonesia may be due to some cultural factors, described as follows.

The agricultural system provides opportunity for women to have some economic contributions to the family. Even though gender role differentiation is present to a certain degree in Indonesia, women have strong autonomy in the household sphere. It is usually the women who control the household budget. The presence of income pooling has made the issue of how much each person contributes to the household economy irrelevant. There is a famous Javanese proverb about this. A wife would say to her husband, "Your money is mine, and my money is mine."

Even though women get involved in agricultural jobs, they are not the primary food producers, so that it is not attractive and profitable for a man to have more than one wife, like in countries where women are the primary food producers. This has made families in Indonesia mostly monogamous. The status of women in monogamous marriage is usually desirable.

Patrilineal structure in the traditional family system has given clear roles to the household members. A husband is considered the head of the household and is not expected to engage in

day-to-day household management. A wife is considered the household manager which makes her have high decision-making power in the family. The Javanese family system is matrilineal and matrifocal. Each person would know his or her status and responsibility without expecting others to play the same roles. Mutual respect and harmonious relationships in the Javanese ideal system could force each person to subdue his or her personal interest to the consensus of the collective.

Patrilineal structure of the Javanese family does not make the role differentiation rigid. This study has revealed that fathers are involved in child caretaking activities and do some household tasks. Monogamous marriage makes the father always sleep in the house and he tends to have high interactions with other family members. However, this study showed that wives did not seem to expect their husbands to get involved in domestic activities, as empirical findings revealed that wives' happiness is negatively correlated to fathers' involvement in these activities.

Matrilineal structure, though not representative for the Indonesian culture (less than 5% of the Indonesian population are of the Minang ethnic group), does not guarantee that females would be more favored than males. This study showed just the opposite; the girl child tended to be treated unfavorably. However, this needs more careful investigation, since Minang women are considered "high powered" and dominant by many Indonesians, and sex discrimination against women in this culture group has never been documented before.

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