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Imagined Violence and Soft Gender: Proposing New Conceptual Categories in Gender Discourses of Indonesian Ethnic Practices

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Abstract
This study explores how Indonesian ethnic communities construct gender meanings distinct from Western notions of rigid roles and domination–subordination. Focusing on Batak, Javanese, and Bugis women, it analyzes how cultural, religious, and social practices internalize gender values and how the categories of imagined violence and soft gender operate in everyday life. Conducted between June and September 2022, the research applied a qualitative exploratory approach through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and cultural document analysis, supported by discourse and semiotic interpretation with triangulation. Findings reveal flexible and contextual gender understandings: Batak women maintain ritual roles despite male political dominance, Javanese women embrace nrimo yet access equal education, and Bugis women embody *siri' na pacce* that binds family honor while granting social authority. Imagined violence emerges as a symbolic, consensual restriction, while soft gender reflects voluntary domestic roles shaped by collective consensus. The

study formulates soft gender as a novel analytical category, reconceptualizes imagined violence in multi-ethnic contexts, advances Southern Feminisms theoretically, and offers inclusive policy insights practically.

***Keywords**: Ethnic Communication, gender, imagined violence, soft gender, Southern Feminisms*

1. Introduction

Gender discourse in the Indonesian context has often been analyzed through a Western lens that emphasizes relations of domination and subordination, as well as rigid divisions between male and female roles. Such models of analysis are widely used in global feminist studies, particularly those emerging in developed countries, where patriarchy is assumed to be the dominant force suppressing women in various aspects of life (Ernanda, 2023; Hamdy & Hudri, 2022). However, this framework is not always relevant for understanding gender dynamics in Indonesia's multiethnic society, where cultural values, religion, and social norms play a crucial role in shaping the meaning of gender. Empirical realities show that women in many ethnic communities in Indonesia are not merely positioned as subordinates, but rather occupy strategic spaces that are recognized in maintaining the balance of family and community life(Afdhal, 2024). For instance, Nasution (2024) and Simangunsong et al. (2025) observe that Batak women continue to be involved in customary rituals, even though the political domain remains predominantly male. Similarly, Herlambang et al. (2023) and Jati (2023) note that Javanese women living under the value of nrimo still consider education as an arena of equality. Meanwhile, Gani & Gani (2024) and Nur et al. (2024) point out that Bugis women, through the concept of *siri' na pacce*, bear both the responsibility of family honor and social authority. These phenomena highlight the importance of re-reading gender categories in Indonesia so as not to fall into reproducing Western theoretical frameworks uncritically.

Several previous studies have underlined the importance of local perspectives in analyzing gender relations. For example, research by Hyunanda et al. (2021) and Purnamasari (2024) on *State Ibuism* demonstrates how the Indonesian state constructs women's identities in ways distinct from Western feminism. Negara et al. (2025) and Titisari et al. (2024) emphasize how Balinese women negotiate gender roles through religious rituals that grant them specific spaces of authority. Isro'iyah & Riinawati (2025) observe how Javanese women navigate Islamic norms and local traditions to create spaces of equality in education and family life. Among the Bugis, studies by Nilan & Maunati (2025) and Patrajaya

et al. (2025) illustrate the complexity of gender through the roles of *calalai* and *calabai*, which challenge binary categorization. Such works affirm that the meaning of gender in Indonesia is always culturally negotiated and cannot be understood solely through universalist paradigms. While these ethnographic works describe women's roles in rituals, education, and social honor, they stop short of theorizing these roles into conceptual categories. This study differs by proposing imagined violence and soft gender as analytical tools to interpret such practices.

In addition, scholarship on symbolic violence also opens space for reading gender in more subtle dimensions. Bourdieu (2020) concept of symbolic violence has been widely applied to explain how social domination is consciously accepted as "natural." In the Indonesian context Roviana et al. (2021) study Muslim women, highlighting how religious practices can serve as both arenas of empowerment and constraints. Ahmad et al. (2024) On gender and Islam in Southeast Asia, it is emphasized that women often accept social agreements without coercion. This resonates with the findings of Kanal & Rottmann (2021), who stress the importance of recognizing women's agency within seemingly constraining social structures. In other words, violence does not always manifest in physical form but often appears symbolically and is constantly negotiated.

Discussions on gender flexibility have also emerged in global feminist literature. Almakhamreh et al. (2022) and Cornejo-Abarca et al. (2025) highlight how women across different cultures dynamically negotiate with patriarchal structures. Agha (2021) and Nambiar et al. (2022) demonstrate that women do not simply submit but also strategize within gendered structures. In the Southeast Asian context, Peletz (2021) and Tran (2024) underscore that women occupy more fluid social positions than those conceptualized in Western discourse. Research by Hao (2022) and Song & Lai (2022) In China, even shows how women's domestic roles can be understood as a form of moral authority that sustains family harmony. These studies indicate that gender is not rigid but rather flexible and open to consensus. This paper does not treat Southern Feminisms as a unified stance but acknowledges its internal diversity and tensions. The concept of soft gender is positioned as one contribution to these debates, rather than as a definitive model.

Nevertheless, despite such advancements, few studies have explicitly formulated new categories for analyzing gender dynamics in Indonesia's multiethnic society. Most research stops at describing women's roles in tradition or religion, without offering new theoretical conceptualizations that could explain the flexibility and consensus observed in daily life.

Moreover, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence is seldom reconsidered in the context of Indonesian culture, which is deeply embedded in negotiations of values and collective acceptance. This gap creates the need for more contextual analytical categories, ones that not only describe but also interpret women's experiences within an epistemology of gender emerging from the Global South.

This study introduces two concepts derived from the empirical experiences of Indonesian women: imagined violence and soft gender. Imagined violence is understood as a form of symbolic violence that is not perceived as brutal repression, but rather as a cultural consensus transmitted across generations. Soft gender, meanwhile, refers to a category that captures flexibility and consensus in the division of domestic and social roles, wherein women are not seen as subordinate but as strategic actors in sustaining community harmony. These two concepts not only provide a contextual explanation of women's experiences in Batak, Javanese, and Bugis societies but also contribute to the development of global feminist theory through the lens of Southern Feminisms, which resists universalism.

Accordingly, this study aims (1) to analyze how Batak, Javanese, and Bugis communities internalize gender meanings through cultural values, religion, and social practices; (2) to explain how imagined violence and soft gender operate in everyday life; and (3) to propose preliminary conceptual categories of gender consciousness rooted in the local experiences of Indonesia's multiethnic society. Rather than claiming to establish a definitive model, this research offers an exploratory framework that enriches the theoretical repertoire of Southern Feminisms and provides insights that may inform more inclusive socio-political discussions sensitive to local gender experiences.

2. Method

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach, as its primary objective is to understand the meanings, experiences, and social negotiations underlying gender constructions in ethnic contexts, dimensions that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods reliant on statistical generalization (Allan, 2020; Cho et al., 2022). The research sites, namely North Sumatra (Batak), East Java (Javanese), and South Sulawesi (Bugis), were selected based on the diversity of cultural repertoires, traditions, and religious norms that represent a spectrum of gender practices in Indonesia. These three ethnic groups are also analytically significant because they embody distinct historical trajectories of kinship, ritual, and power relations, providing a strong basis for

examining the articulation of "imagined violence" and "soft gender. Sites were also chosen to reflect variation across class, religious affiliation, and urban–rural settings, as these dimensions significantly shape gender experiences. These sites allow for rich contextual comparison while highlighting internal variations relevant to the research questions (Cossu, 2021). Fieldwork was conducted from June to September 2022 to capture the rhythms of both seasonal and daily domestic and ritual activities.

Informants were selected purposively, with criteria including women of productive age (20–55 years) who actively engage in domestic, social, and customary practices, and who represented diverse educational and occupational backgrounds to ensure variation in perspectives. This age range was considered crucial because it encompasses different life stages in which women typically assume multiple gendered roles, from education and work to marriage and cultural participation, thereby providing diverse perspectives relevant to the research questions. Diversity in class, religion, and place of residence was also considered to avoid homogenizing women's gendered experiences. The main sample comprised 36 informants (12 per site), a number determined to achieve data depth and thematic saturation consistent with empirical findings in prior qualitative studies (Hossain et al., 2024). Additionally, six key informants, consisting of customary leaders, religious figures, or community leaders (two per site), were interviewed as contextual and cultural verifiers.

Data collection combined semi-structured in-depth interviews (lasting 60–120 minutes, recorded and transcribed), participant observation of domestic routines and customary events (field reports and fieldnotes), and analysis of cultural documents such as customary narratives, proverbs, and religious texts. Interviews were designed to elicit personal and reflective narratives, observations provided contextualized praxis data, and document analysis situated practices within broader symbolic repertoires (Kawar et al., 2024; Levitt et al., 2021).

Analysis was conducted iteratively: transcription, thematic coding, and interpretation of ethnic discourse and social semiotics to examine the internalization of gender values and symbols. Triangulation was applied through the combination of sources (across age groups, customary leaders), methods (interviews, observations, documents), and member-checking alongside peer debriefing to enhance the credibility of findings (Bhangu et al., 2023; Mohajan, 2018). All procedures adhered to ethical principles: informed consent, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity to safeguard the dignity of informants during and after the research. Particular attention was given to cultural sensitivity protocols, such as obtaining permission from customary leaders before entering ritual spaces and respecting local

norms in dress and interaction. Reflexivity was also practiced, with the researchers critically reflecting on their own positionality, including gender, ethnicity, and institutional background, and its potential influence on field interactions and interpretive processes.

For greater clarity, the research process is illustrated in the following flow figure 1 below:

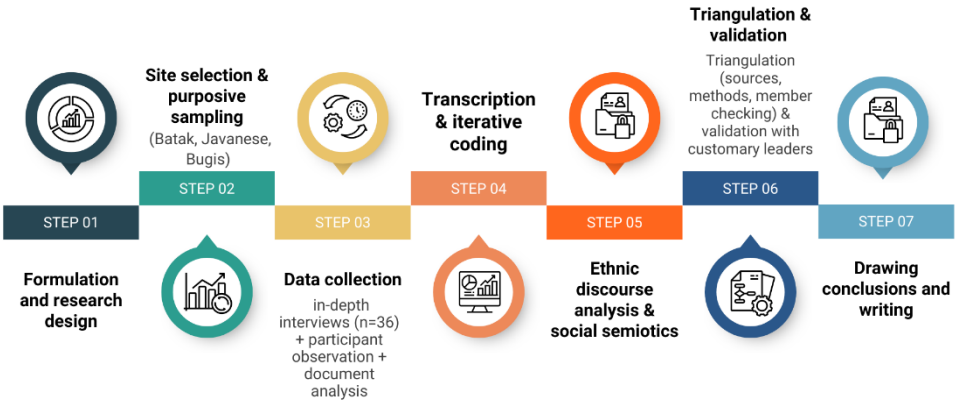

Figure 1 Research Flow Diagram
Source: Author's analysis, 2025

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Flexibility of Gender Meanings in the Multiethnic Indonesian Context

The flexibility of gender meanings in Indonesia's multiethnic society demonstrates that social constructions of male and female roles cannot be understood solely through a Western lens that emphasizes rigidity and dominance–subordination. Within Batak, Javanese, and Bugis communities, gender emerges as the outcome of negotiation between cultural values, religion, and everyday social dynamics. This context affirms the view of Almakhamreh et al. (2022) regarding gender as negotiated practice, in which gender is not a static structure but a relational process continually negotiated across space, time, and situation. In other words, women's positions in society cannot be interpreted as absolute subjugation but rather as the result of a complex cultural consensus. At the same time, the data also revealed tensions and contradictions, where younger women or those with higher education sometimes questioned these consensual roles, indicating that consensus is not universal.

In Batak communities, customary rituals occupy a central position in social life. Although traditional political domains are often male-dominated, women maintain significant roles in certain rituals. Field

observations revealed women's active involvement in preparing wedding ceremonies, from arranging dishes and organizing the ulos distribution process to ensuring the smooth flow of the event. One informant, R., explained that their engagement in rituals is not merely domestic work but a symbolic moral responsibility for preserving tradition. However, other informants, such as L., a younger participant, expressed frustration that despite their heavy responsibilities, final decisions remained reserved for men, suggesting a latent sense of exclusion. Women are regarded as custodians of balance within ceremonial practices, even if they do not sit in formal decision-making seats. During the ulos distribution, for instance, women were observed standing in line, offering prayers, and ensuring adherence to customary rules, which serves as an embodiment of symbolic authority, indicating that ritual power is not entirely masculine but complementary.

In contrast, Javanese society in East Java reflects the value of nrimo as a cornerstone in gender construction. This value is often understood as female submission to male decisions, particularly within the household. However, interviews with informant S. revealed that nrimo does not signify women's voicelessness but rather a strategy to sustain relational harmony. She emphasized that while she positions her husband as the head of the family, she still retains autonomy in making decisions about her children's education. Yet other women, such as NA., admitted that *nrimo* sometimes constrained their aspirations for higher education or employment, indicating selective acceptance of this cultural value depending on class and generational background. Field observations further showed women's active participation in school committee meetings, where they contributed to decision-making. This indicates selective equality, particularly in the educational sphere, even as compliance remains emphasized within the domestic domain. Nonetheless, such educational participation did not always translate into equal opportunities in the labor market, where discriminatory hiring and promotion practices persist, showing that cultural flexibility does not erase structural inequalities.

Meanwhile, in Bugis communities of South Sulawesi, the concept of *siri' na pacce* plays a crucial role in regulating gender relations. This value underscores family honor and social responsibility. Informant M. explained that Bugis women carry a dual burden: safeguarding the family's reputation while simultaneously maintaining community order. This was especially evident during mappacci rituals, where women not only led symbolic purification ceremonies for the bride but also ensured that no violations occurred that might tarnish the family's honor. However, some

younger women, such as WM., critiqued *Siri* as reinforcing surveillance over women's bodies, limiting their mobility compared to men. These findings show that women's authority is not confined to the domestic realm but extends to functioning as moral guardians of the collective. Bugis women are not merely subordinated under patriarchy but socially recognized as bearers of community values.

A comparison of the three ethnic groups illustrates that gender meanings in Indonesia are flexible, contextual, and cannot be reduced to a domination–subordination dichotomy. In practice, women are not simply subordinated but participate in social processes in ways shaped by local cultures. At the same time, this flexibility is uneven, as not all women benefit equally. Class, generation, and urban and rural location often mediate how much authority they can claim. The following table highlights key differences across the three ethnic groups.

Table 1. Flexibility of Gender Meanings in Three Indonesian Ethnic Groups

Ethnic Group	Key Gender Practice	Women's Position	Form of Gender Flexibility
Batak	Customary rituals (ceremonies, ulos distribution)	Custodians of ritual balance despite male dominance in customary politics	Symbolic and moral roles remain acknowledged
Javanese	Nrimo values in family; children's education	Symbolically subordinate to husbands but empowered in education	Selective equality, especially in education
Bugis	*Siri' na pacce* (honor and solidarity)	Guardians of family honor and community morality	Social authority in upholding collective values

Source: Field Data, 2022

This analysis demonstrates that women across these three ethnic groups are not merely positioned as subordinates. Instead, they hold contextually significant authority, expressed symbolically, selectively, or morally. While Western frameworks often interpret gender as a rigid and oppressive structure, in multiethnic Indonesia, gender relations are negotiated according to local norms and values. This aligns with Almakhamreh et al. (2022), who conceptualize gender as a negotiated practice, where male–female relations are continually subject to cultural deliberation. Yet, this negotiation often coexists with structural constraints that privilege men, such as political gatekeeping, control over inheritance,

or gendered labor hierarchies, showing that consensus does not eliminate power asymmetries.

Moreover, this flexibility highlights women's cultural strategies to sustain their roles without overtly confronting patriarchal structures. Among the Batak, women leverage ritual symbolism to affirm their presence. In Java, women reinterpret nrimo not as submission but as a strategy to preserve harmony while advocating for children's education. In Bugis society, women invoke *siri' na pacce* as a moral justification for recognized social authority. Thus, gender roles are not solely imposed through coercion or repression but are enacted as socially lived and negotiated agreements. Nonetheless, these strategies should not be romanticized as pure agency; rather, they reveal the ambivalence of women's positions, where consent, accommodation, and subtle resistance intertwine under patriarchal structures.

3.2. Imagined Violence: Symbolic Violence as Consensus

The concept of imagined violence emerging from this study reveals a distinctive dynamic in gender relations within Indonesia's multiethnic communities, particularly among the Batak, Javanese, and Bugis. Violence, typically understood as domination, repression, or coercion, manifests here in subtler, symbolic forms that, at certain points, are consciously accepted as cultural consensus. Restrictions on women's public roles are not imposed through force that provokes resistance but instead materialize as collectively recognized mechanisms for maintaining social harmony. However, not all women accept these arrangements uncritically; some younger and more educated informants voiced frustration at the limits placed on their mobility, showing that consensus is not total but negotiated amid generational and class tensions.

This sharply contrasts with Bourdieu (2020), notion of symbolic violence, which emphasizes implicit dominance within social structures. Whereas symbolic violence positions women as unconsciously accepting subordination, imagined violence highlights women's conscious acceptance of certain boundaries as part of shared cultural meanings. At the same time, unlike Bourdieu's account that still acknowledges complicity under constraint, imagined violence foregrounds both agency and ambivalence, where consent may coexist with structural asymmetries that continue to privilege men.

A Batak woman (SM, 45) described how, although women seldom appear in formal local politics, they remain influential in ritual contexts, particularly in organizing ceremonial sequences or distributing ulos. For her, exclusion from politics was not coercion but a consensual division of

tasks rooted in adat. Women do not perceive this as repression but as an equally important contribution. Observations during a Batak wedding revealed women busily preparing food in a communal kitchen while simultaneously coordinating rituals in constant communication with male adat leaders. This demonstrates that power is not monopolized by men but symbolically negotiated through shared cultural rules. Yet another informant (L., 28) criticized this arrangement, saying that women's ritual labor is undervalued because men ultimately retain decision-making authority, suggesting discontent beneath the surface consensus.

Similar dynamics were observed among Javanese women. DS (38) explained that nrimo is not an absolute submission to men but a mode of acceptance ensuring household harmony. Accepting domestic responsibilities does not preclude women from higher education or careers. Observations in an East Javanese village showed young women active in youth organizations, leading cultural events, and even managing digital savings groups, while in formal village meetings, they often assumed supporting roles. These findings indicate acknowledged "limitations" that are not perceived as barriers but as consensual strategies for maintaining stability in gender relations.

Among the Bugis, *siri' na pacce* reveals an even more complex dimension. Bugis women shoulder responsibility for family honor while exercising considerable authority in household and community matters. NR (50) emphasized that safeguarding siri' is not solely a male obligation but a collective one. Women, for instance, may reject marriage proposals deemed dishonorable, and such decisions are respected by the community. Observations in South Sulawesi showed women not confined to kitchens or private spaces but actively managing social networks, leading family events, and participating in community discussions, though still framed by cultural rules. These dynamics illustrate that restrictions are not repressive but function as a socially sanctioned consensus.

From these findings, it becomes evident that imagined violence cannot be reduced to a mechanism of male domination. Instead, it constitutes a cultural arena in which women are active participants. Its distinction from Bourdieu's symbolic violence lies in the dimension of awareness and participation. Whereas symbolic violence implies unconscious internalization, imagined violence emphasizes women's conscious agreement to shared rules. Gender boundaries among Batak, Javanese, and Bugis communities resemble collectively negotiated "rules of the game" rather than unilateral instruments of repression.

This resonates with Tran (2024) argument that women are not merely objects of repression but active subjects in producing and enforcing social

norms. Such insights reinforce the interpretation that imagined violence represents not subordination but a mechanism for sustaining gendered balance. In Indonesia's multiethnic context, women negotiate and exercise authority precisely within these symbolic boundaries. To elucidate the conceptualization of Imagined Violence as a form of consensual symbolic violence, the figure 2 below offers a visual representation.

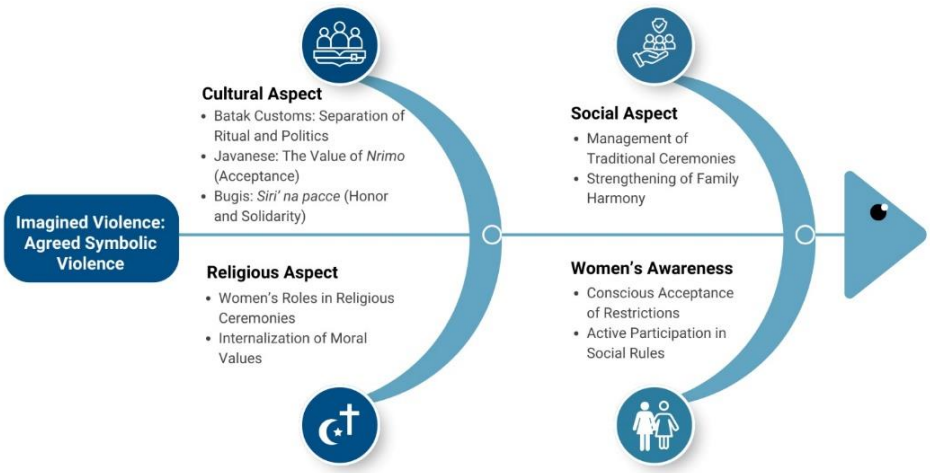

Figure 2 Factors Shaping Imagined Violence as Consensual Symbolic Violence
Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Practically, the phenomenon of imagined violence underscores that violence need not always be framed antagonistically. In societies with deeply rooted cultural structures, consensus operates as a vital mechanism for preserving tradition. Women are not only subjects of structural constraints but also agents who consciously accept, adjust, and even reinterpret prevailing rules to maintain collective well-being. Still, recognizing imagined violence as consensus should not romanticize women's compliance; rather, it highlights the ambivalence of agency, where accommodation, subtle resistance, and structural inequality intertwine.

3.3. Soft Gender: An Analytical Category of Flexibility and Consensus

The concept of soft gender emerging from this study offers a new perspective for understanding women's domestic practices among the Batak, Javanese, and Bugis communities. Domestic roles have long been associated with subordination, spatial restriction, and the reproduction of inequality. However, field findings indicate that in the multiethnic Indonesian context, domesticity is better understood as a space of flexibility and consensus rather than a mere instrument of repression. Thus, soft gender may be understood as an analytical category that explains how women's roles are enacted not through coercion or restrictive structures, but through collective agreements aimed at sustaining social harmony. Yet this consensus is not uniform; several younger women expressed dissatisfaction with the unequal burden of care work, showing that soft gender operates within a field of negotiation, tension, and occasional resistance. This resonates with the spirit of Southern Feminisms, which rejects Western universalism (Martínez & Agüero, 2021), as well as Toole (2022) notion of contextual feminist epistemologies, which emphasizes grounding theory in women's local experiences rather than treating them as supplementary data to universal models. However, unlike concepts such as negotiated agency or moral authority, soft gender highlights the dual movement of voluntary compliance and structural constraint. Women's agency exists, but it is exercised within limits that still advantage men.

Among Batak women, domesticity cannot be reduced to marginalization. One informant, SM (45 years old), noted that although she held no direct position in customary politics, she took pride in coordinating ritual events. For her, organizing the large communal kitchen, distributing food, and arranging the ulos were not secondary tasks, but rather central to ritual success. Field observations at a Batak wedding ritual revealed the intensity of women's work in the kitchen, amidst the smell of simmering meat and the lively sound of coordination, while men occupied the main ritual hall. Yet, key technical decisions concerning the order of ceremonies, role distribution, and ulos recipients depended heavily on women directing affairs from the domestic space. This shows that Batak women's domesticity is not subordinated labor but a mechanism of consensus that affords them a flexible, fluid, and culturally embedded form of authority. At the same time, another Batak informant (L., 30) admitted feeling "overworked" during ceremonies, pointing to an unequal distribution of ritual labor that men rarely share, revealing how consensus also masks asymmetry.

For Javanese women, the practice of nrimo (acceptance) is often perceived externally as passive submission. However, interviews with DS

(38 years old) revealed a different meaning. She explained that acceptance does not equate to a lack of choice, but serves as a strategy to maintain household balance without asserting herself confrontationally. For her, nrimo opened opportunities to pursue higher education, as she strategically avoided contesting daily domestic roles while quietly arranging the conditions for her continued studies. Field observations in East Java villages showed young women engaged in domestic routines such as cooking or childcare, while simultaneously running online businesses or participating in digital courses. These practices demonstrate that Javanese domesticity is not rigid but rather flexible. Acceptance becomes a way of creating new possibilities in education and the economy. Yet a younger participant (R., 22) remarked that nrimo sometimes felt like "self-silencing," suggesting that flexibility does not eliminate the pressure to conform, particularly for women aspiring to political or public leadership.

Bugis women add further complexity through the concept of *siri' na pacce*. NR (50 years old) explained that safeguarding siri' (honor) is not solely a male duty but also a female responsibility. In daily life, she held considerable social authority, particularly in regulating family relations and rejecting marriage proposals deemed dishonorable. Field observations in South Sulawesi revealed that women who appeared to "work behind the scenes" at family events in fact controlled decision-making, from guest invitations to event organization and negotiations with community leaders. Here, domesticity is not imprisonment but a channel of authority rooted in a shared consensus regarding the protection of collective honor.

Across these three ethnic contexts, women's domestic roles in Indonesia cannot be understood through Western binaries of public–private or domination–subordination. Instead, domesticity functions as a flexible domain that may be reinterpreted according to collective needs. This is what is referred to as soft gender: a form of gender role that is neither rigid nor coercive, but fluid and grounded in consensus. Women are not forced into obedience; rather, they choose to comply because compliance itself is a culturally valued means of preserving harmonious relations. This distinction is critical, as it reframes domesticity in Indonesia not as a marker of backwardness or repression, but as a social strategy that sustains relationships and strengthens women's positions. The diagram below visualizes the Soft Gender relations across Batak, Javanese, and Bugis contexts. The figure 3 below visualizes the Soft Gender relations across Batak, Javanese, and Bugis contexts.

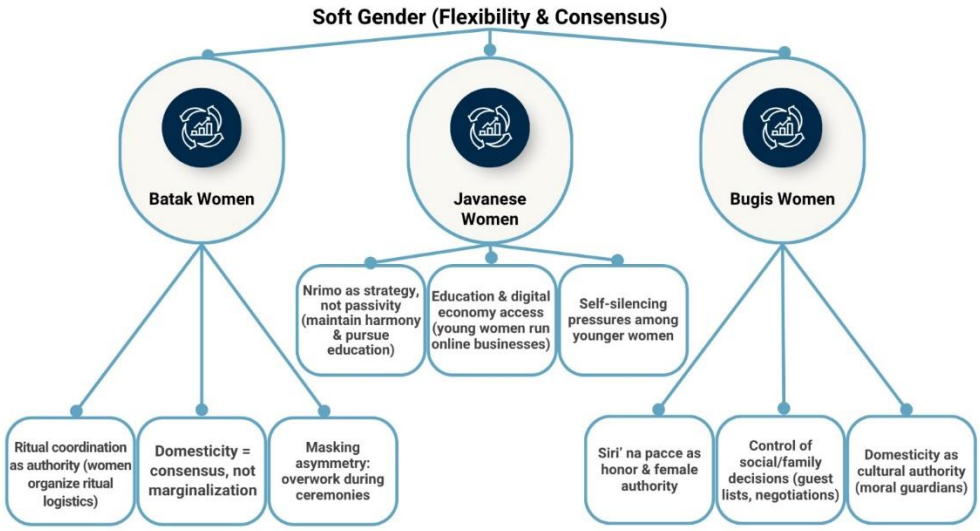

Figure 3 Soft Gender: Negotiated Women's Roles across Batak, Javanese, and Bugis Communities
Source: Author's analysis, 2025

Theoretically, soft gender challenges universalist feminist assumptions that equate domesticity with repression. Martínez & Agüero (2021) In their articulation of Southern Feminisms, they insist that gender theory must remain open to experiences from the Global South, which often diverge from Western models of domination and subordination. Similarly, Simon & Hasan (2025) argue that feminist knowledge must be contextual, rooted in women's lived realities rather than abstracted into universal categories. The Indonesian case aligns with these perspectives by demonstrating that domesticity does not universally signify subordination, but rather represents a domain of flexibility that affirms women's agency.

Practically, soft gender underscores consensus as the central mechanism sustaining domestic roles. The women interviewed did not perceive their roles as burdensome, but instead as sources of pride and identity. Several emphasized that without women's presence, rituals and household life would lack balance. Such a consensus demonstrates that power does not always manifest through coercive domination, but may also emerge as a form of soft power collectively agreed upon.

3.4. Education as a Space of Selective Equality

Education, within the context of Indonesia's multiethnic society, emerges as one of the relatively equal spaces for men and women, although

such equality is not absolute. Field findings reveal that in Batak, Javanese, and Bugis communities alike, education is regarded as an essential capital that must be accessed by all children regardless of gender. This reflects a collective recognition that education is the primary means of elevating the family's dignity. However, the equality offered by education remains selective: although women gain the same access to formal education, they continue to face stricter limitations in political and economic domains. In other words, equality in education does not automatically translate into equality across all social spheres. Moreover, informants emphasized that even when daughters achieve higher academic levels than their brothers, families and communities still expect them to prioritize marriage and domestic duties, illustrating how cultural expectations constrain the benefits of educational equality.

In interviews, LS (34 years old) from the Batak community explained that her parents emphasized the importance of higher education for both sons and daughters. She felt she was never treated differently from her brothers in terms of opportunities to continue schooling. Yet, she also acknowledged that after graduation, her avenues for self-actualization were largely in social and educational fields, while political spaces remained dominated by men. LS's statement demonstrates how educational equality can coexist with restrictions in other domains. Field observations in a Batak family showed a daughter receiving full support to pursue higher education in a major city, while decisions regarding customary leadership remained in the hands of men. Education is viewed as a "modern" sphere that opens equality, yet customary law continues to reinforce gender boundaries in the "traditional" realm. Another Batak informant (HM., 27) described frustration at being encouraged to obtain a university degree but later pressured to accept a "supportive" role in her husband's career, highlighting a structural gap between aspiration and opportunity.

A similar dynamic was observed in Java. DS (38 years old) recounted how she was able to pursue higher education thanks to her family's support, even while continuing her daily domestic roles. Her practice of nrimo (acceptance) was not an expression of resignation, but rather a strategy to maintain family harmony while advancing through education. Field observations in an East Javanese village revealed that young women not only pursued formal education but also engaged in supplementary courses such as computer or digital skills training. However, despite acquiring such skills, public-sector roles involving decision-making remained largely inaccessible to women. Educational equality, therefore,

does not necessarily imply equality in all forms of social participation, but instead reflects a limited and selective form of equality.

Within the Bugis context, the concept of *siri' na pacce* also influences education. NR (50 years old) explained that safeguarding family honor means ensuring that all children receive a proper education. She stressed that daughters are just as obliged as sons to pursue higher education, since academic achievement is considered a form of family honor. Yet, NR also acknowledged that although her daughter successfully earned a university degree, she was still expected to maintain the family's reputation carefully in her social life and career choices. Field observations in South Sulawesi showed young Bugis women with strong academic achievements, yet when it came to political careers or formal leadership, they tended to hold back, as though such domains remained taboo for women to enter. The figure 4 visualizes Education as a Space of Selective Equality within the Batak, Javanese, and Bugis contexts

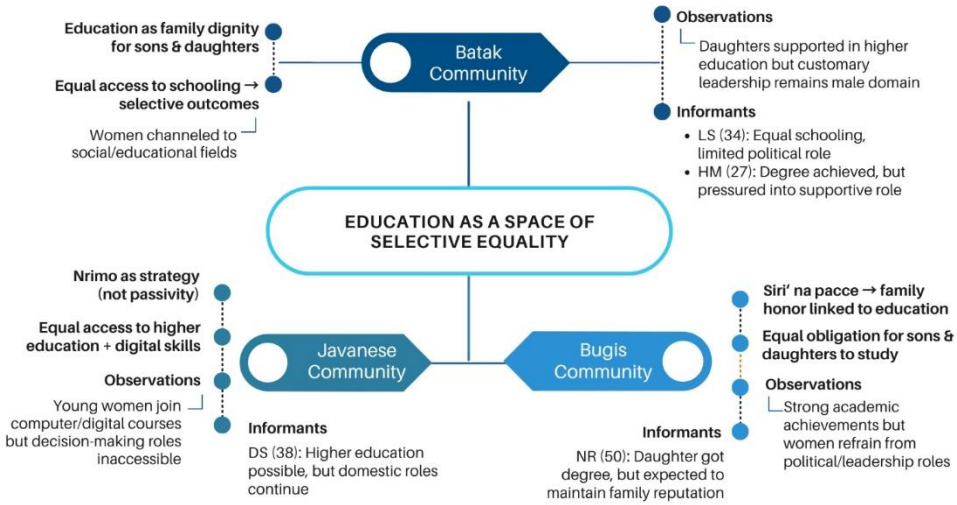

Figure 4 Education as a Space of Selective Equality in Multiethnic Indonesia
Source: Author's analysis, 2025

This phenomenon aligns with Ezegwu & Cin's (2022) argument that education becomes the initial arena of gender resistance as well as the most open space for women to negotiate their roles. However, such resistance does not always extend into the economic and political spheres, as gender boundaries continue to be preserved by social consensus and cultural values. In Indonesia's multiethnic society, education is perceived as a

neutral and progressive sphere, yet this neutrality ceases at the threshold when women attempt to enter spaces considered the domain of men.

From these findings, it is evident that education provides a form of selective equality. It opens space for women's participation in gaining knowledge, academic credentials, and certain professional opportunities, but it does not fully dismantle gender boundaries in politics and economics. This selective equality can be understood as a form of cultural compromise: society permits women to achieve parity in "modern" spheres such as education, while continuing to restrict them in domains deemed fundamental to social and customary stability. Thus, education operates as both an enabling and limiting force: it equips women with credentials yet simultaneously channels them into socially acceptable fields, leaving the structures of political and economic power largely intact. Such selective equality underscores that gender cannot be understood universally, but is always constructed in local contexts with differentiated social domains. Education indeed serves as an initial site of resistance, and a gateway to equality, yet such resistance must continually be negotiated within the broader cultural framework.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that gender relations in Batak, Javanese, and Bugis communities are shaped less by domination–subordination than by cultural negotiation, flexibility, and consensus, where "imagined violence" and "soft gender" are proposed as exploratory tools rather than definitive models. These insights contribute to feminist anthropology and Southern Feminisms while suggesting practical implications, particularly the need for socio-political policies that not only recognize cultural consensus but also address structural barriers such as political exclusion, labor market discrimination, and gendered gatekeeping. At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations – purposive sampling, the predominance of women's voices, and the absence of urban or migrant perspectives – and recognizes that globalization, digital media, and state policies are reshaping cultural practices in ways beyond its scope. Thus, the contribution lies not in formulating a comprehensive model but in offering a provisional framework that invites further research into diverse communities, generational shifts, and the intersections of local and transnational feminist debates.

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