

# GENDER RELATIONS IN THE FAMILY OF THE PRIANGAN REGENT IN THE ERA OF THE DUTCH COLONIAL GOVERNMENT

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Received : 29 October 2025	Published : 28 December 2025
Revised : 20 November 2025	DOI : <a href="https://doi.org/10.54443/morfai.v6i2.4868">https://doi.org/10.54443/morfai.v6i2.4868</a>
Accepted : 15 December 2025	Publish Link : <a href="https://radjapublika.com/index.php/MORFAI/article/view/4868">https://radjapublika.com/index.php/MORFAI/article/view/4868</a>

## Abstract

Traditional gender constructs often adhere to a patriarchal system that places men in a position of dominance over women. These unequal relations occur in almost all social strata of society, including among the nobility. This study attempts to explore the patterns of gender roles that were formed within the families of the Priangan regents during the Dutch colonial period from 1800 to 1942. This study uses a descriptive qualitative case study method, collecting data from various literature in books, journals, newspapers, and websites related to the theme, which is then analyzed through a gender lens. The results show that men have a dominant role in family life, reflected in the rule that only men can become bureaucratic leaders, family leaders, and are free to practice polygamy. Meanwhile, women played the role of symbols of family honor who were tasked with appearing elegant, educating children, and being responsible for traditional activities such as celebrations or feasts. These gender relations were influenced by the construction of Javanese traditional values through colonization during the Islamic Mataram Kingdom era, Dutch rules, and Islamic values embraced by the Priangan nobility, which ultimately created a patriarchal gender ideology pattern that tended to marginalize women.

**Keywords:** *Gender Relations, Regent of Priangan, Patriarchy.*

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender is inseparable from cultural influences. Gender itself is understood as characteristics inherent in men and women through social and cultural construction processes (Fakih, 2020). Gender is not merely an individual identity, but can also be a social structure that shapes power relations between men and women (Connell, 1987). In general, traditional gender relations worldwide adhere to a patriarchal system, in which men often hold dominant power in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. In patriarchal culture, a dichotomy is created between men as the subject (the essential) and women as the object or the other (Bouvair, 2011).

In Indonesia, patriarchy has existed since the time of ancient kingdoms, reflected in the power system and customs that place only men as worthy leaders. Remnants of past cultures can be seen in indigenous cultures, such as the Akur Community in Ciamis, which states that women's primary duty is to manage the household and are not permitted to become pupuhu or traditional leaders (Khoerunisa & Wandani, 2024). The strength of patriarchal culture in the past is more clearly illustrated in Javanese culture. There is a term known as "kanca wingking," meaning a woman who is a friend behind (Winarsih, 2023). There is also the term 3 M: macak, masak, and manak, meaning to decorate, cook, and give birth, where these three terms refer to women's primary duties in the domestic sphere (Septiana et al., 2024). Javanese women's access to power is almost limited, although some women have influence within the palace (Kumar, 2008). These gender relations not only adhere to a patriarchal system, but also appear feudal, where women are forced to carry out domestic roles and submit to family rules (Blackburn, 2004).

Generally, these unequal gender relations are influenced by the formation of gender ideology, referring to the system of beliefs, values, and norms that shape how society understands and regulates gender roles in social, economic, and political life (Connell, 1987). The formation of patriarchal gender ideology in Indonesia in the past was not only influenced by local customs and religious values but also by the rules of the colonial government. The Civil Code (Burgerlijk Wetboek), adopted from Dutch law, has regulations that place women under the authority of men, either as wives subject to their husbands or as children under the authority of their fathers (Sutherland, 1979). Thus, the patriarchal structure in Indonesia in the past was influenced by local culture, colonial government regulations, and the religions practiced by the community at that time.

There were also movements supporting gender equality in Indonesia. Raden Ajeng Kartini, a Javanese aristocrat and wife of the Regent of Rembang, wrote extensively about the importance of education for indigenous women. She founded the Kartini School in Semarang in 1912, which later expanded to other cities on the island of Java. Furthermore, Kartini's resistance to patriarchy was her refusal to prostrate herself to men, a Javanese tradition. One of Kartini's most popular works is the book "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang" (After Darkness Comes Light), a reflection of Kartini's thoughts on equality, freedom, and women's advancement. This reality demonstrates unequal gender relations, extending from the common people to the nobility. This is reinforced by Saputra and Qarimah's research on Wakatobi folklore using an intersectional approach, which shows that Wakatobi noblewomen experience double discrimination both as women and as members of an elite class whose existence is often controlled (Saputra and Qarimah, 2023). Meanwhile, Windiyarti's research shows that Balinese noblewomen face strong patriarchal cultural pressures in maintaining their dignity and self-esteem. Despite being from the elite class, they remain vulnerable due to social constructs that limit their freedom (Windiyarti, 2015).

Based on this reality, the author conducted a study on gender relations in the family of the Regent of Priangan during the Dutch colonial era, who at that time were referred to as the menak. The term "menak" in the Dutch colonial era in Priangan referred to the local Sundanese elite or nobility who were trusted to hold positions in the social structure and the Dutch colonial government. Priangan is a former region of the Pajajaran kingdom that was once controlled by Islamic Mataram, the VOC, England, and the Netherlands. The area now includes the regencies of Ciamis, Tasikmalaya, Garut, Cimahi, Sumedang, Bandung, Cianjur, Bogor, Sukabumi, and Cianjur. The era of Dutch colonial rule was limited from 1900-1942 based on previous research conducted by Prof. Nina Herlina Lubis as one of the main data sources (Lubis, 1998). The purpose of this study is to explore gender roles between men and women within the Priangan Regent's family. The dynamics of power shifts in Priangan have the potential to shape complex patriarchal cultural patterns. Therefore, the research question is, "What were the gender relations in the Priangan Regent's family during the Dutch colonial era?"

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the mindset of the Priangan Regent's family during the Dutch colonial era requires an understanding of the concept of gender ideology, a mindset that seeks to differentiate between men and women according to their appropriateness (Humm, 2007). Through gender ideology, humans attempt to differentiate between men and women based on their experiences. Ideology can shape memories and thoughts, leading people to believe that men and women are different. In patriarchal cultures, gender ideology grants men greater power than women. This greater power encompasses the division of labor, rights, power, and responsibilities within both the family and society. Culture is the most powerful tool in reproducing unequal gender relations, as traditional values are often maintained without criticism (Fakih, 2020). Traditional values containing gender role inequality are reflected in Indonesian society. Fauzi's research shows that men in the social construction of Mandailing society are very powerful social agents in the public sphere and are considered representatives of women (Fauzi, 2020). Traditional religious values also place women in a position that must submit to men as leaders (Mahmood, 2005). In Islam, women are not leaders within the family and are not encouraged to become political leaders. Women play a domestic role as housewives and are better off not working and receive smaller inheritance rights than men (Bahri, 2015). These two studies provide a picture of the cultural conditions of the Priangan menak, who are adherents of Islam and belong to the Sundanese ethnic group, which is closely linked to traditional culture.

Cultural contact through colonialism also strengthened patriarchal gender ideology. Istianah's research shows that the egalitarian gender construction in the Sundanese Land was displaced by the colonialism of the Islamic Mataram Kingdom, the Dutch, and the Japanese, becoming patriarchal (Istianah, 2020). Throughout Indonesia, Dutch colonialism did not immediately eradicate the local patriarchal system, but instead strengthened it through laws and administrative policies that placed women under male authority, both as wives and as citizens. Furthermore, colonial legal systems such as the Burgerlijk Wetboek also reinforced the position of men as heads of families and sole rulers over property, children, and family decisions. Thus, colonialism became a force that strengthened and institutionalized existing patriarchal structures, creating gender inequality that persisted into the postcolonial era. The limited power women possess leads to discrimination against them. Weber stated that power is related to domination, a condition where desires are manifested in the form of rules or commands to influence the actions of those being controlled. The controlled person will even feel that the commands come from their own heart (Lukes, 1986). In understanding society's unconsciousness of this domination of women, Foucault argues that this case falls into a discourse called "power strategies." Foucault stated that women's bodies in patriarchal cultures are forced to

be controlled. The individual body is not the center of life, but a vehicle for discourses that perpetuate the establishment of certain conditions (Nursyifa & Hannah, 2022).

## METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with a case study type, which aims to understand in-depth the dynamics of gender roles in the Priangan regent's family during the Dutch colonial era. Case studies were chosen because they allow researchers to intensively and contextually explore specific social phenomena, with a focus on distinctive historical and cultural settings. Case studies provide space for researchers to explore a phenomenon in depth within a real-life context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This approach is also suitable for use in research that aims to understand the meaning behind social behavior in complex settings (Satori & Komariah, 2013). Data were collected through a literature review of various sources, including history books, academic journals, newspapers, and websites relevant to the theme. The collected data were textual and thematically analyzed to identify patterns of gender representation within the family structure of the Priangan regents during the Dutch colonial era. The data obtained were then analyzed using a gender perspective, a conceptual framework used to examine how social constructions of men's and women's roles operate within the context of power and culture. Gender analysis enabled researchers to uncover whether women's positions within the Priangan regents' families were patriarchal, as is common in the status quo gender constructions of many traditional cultures (Nurachmi & Hidayatulloh, 2021). Furthermore, other studies have shown that gender roles within the family shift with social and cultural changes (Afriзал & Lelah, 2021). From this analysis, conclusions were drawn.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Objective Conditions of Gender Roles in the Priangan Regent's Family

As an extension of the Dutch in Priangan, the nobility were integrated into a hierarchical government structure. Supreme power rested with the regent (bupati), who presided over the district level, assisted by the patih (patih) in administrative matters. Below him, the sub-district head (wedana) led the district, the sub-district assistant (camat) managed the sub-district, and the village head (lurah) led the village. All these officials were appointed by the Dutch government and generally formed family dynasties. These positions were held by men from the nobility and passed down through the male line (Lubis, 1998). This demonstrates that male domination began in the social and political structures of the time. However, women who were nobles, such as the wives and daughters of the regents, received special privileges in Priangan. They were respected because the feudal structure that formed resulted in a distinction between commoners and nobles. Although not all women from the nobility received formal education, regents typically brought in teachers from the Netherlands to teach them reading and Dutch, as well as other skills such as sewing and cooking (Lubis, 1998). Women from the regent's family are expected to maintain a graceful, beautiful, and polite appearance while upholding prevailing moral values. Their activities are largely spent at home. They are responsible for household chores, such as educating children, and traditional activities like celebrations and feasts. Their educational access focuses more on household skills and social etiquette, rather than on entering government (Lubis, 1998). This is the primary role of Priangan women as symbols of family honor and preservers of tradition (Marlina, 2006).

**Table 1. Several Regents in Priangan who Practice Polygamy**

Name of Regent	Year	Area	Number of Wives
RAA Wiratanuningrat	1908-1937	Sukapura/Tasikmalaya	4
RAA Kusumadingrat	1839-1886	Galuh/Ciamis	8
RA Wira Tanu Datar VII	1871-1913	Cianjur	2
RAA Martanagara	1893-1913	Bandung	3
Prince Suria Kusumah Adinata	1836-1882	Sumedang	31

Source: Compiled from various references.

Regarding marriage, polygamy was common among the Regents. The practice of polygamy symbolized power, prosperity, and noble status. At that time, the higher a person's position and wealth, the greater their likelihood of practicing polygamy. Polygamy among the Regents became a sign of social status and a representation of power that was culturally permitted and structurally perpetuated (Lubis, 1998). The main wife was distinguished from other wives or concubines. The main wife was called *garwa padmi* and the concubines were called *garwa leutik*. The wives of the nobles were given the title *Nyai Raden*. Feudalism was strongly felt when they had children; sons were usually given the title *Raden*, while daughters of *garwa padmi* were given the title *Raden Ayu*, and daughters of *garwa leutik* were given the title *Raden Roro*. Colonial government regulations meant that children and wives had to obey their fathers as head of the family (Sutherland, 1979).

These marriages were not merely intended to foster ordinary kinship ties, but also served as a diplomatic tool to maintain political stability, ensure loyalty, and create coalitions among local elites. Polygamy allowed a noble figure to establish ties with multiple noble families simultaneously. Thus, political power was built not only through formal positions but also through widespread family ties. Marriages between nobles served not only to cement kinship ties but also to cement networks of power (Lubis, 1998). One concrete example of this practice is *Raden Adipati Aria Wiratanuningrat*, the Regent of Tasikmalaya in the early 20th century, who had four wives: one main wife (*garwa padmi*) and three concubines (*garwa leutik*). His main wife, *Raden Ayu Rajapamerat*, came from a Cianjur aristocratic family, while the other concubines came from the local elite and local bureaucratic officials. These marriages became an effective tool in expanding the regent's power network, creating personal-political relationships across regions, and maintaining political support from various parties in the Priangan region (Marlina, 1988). Only boys had the opportunity to succeed to government positions. Those who were groomed as regents were given a higher title than *Raden*, namely *Pangeran*. The difference in treatment between boys and girls was evident. Within the house, girls were placed in a section of the building called *kaputren*, while boys were housed in a separate section. There were no specific rules regarding children's clothing, but there were provisions regarding the equipment boys were permitted to own. Conversely, girls' clothing was not specifically regulated, indicating that women's positions tended to receive less attention (Lubis, 1998).

### **Gender Relations Patterns and Cultural Construction from Outside Priangan**

Based on the description in the previous sub-chapter, a pattern of gender relations was found in the families of the regents in Priangan during the Dutch colonial era, namely: (1) Men are leaders from the family to the social and political life of society; (2) Women's work and education are limited to the domestic sphere such as educating children, dressing up, reading and writing, cooking, sewing and being responsible for family traditional activities; (3) Polygamy is usually carried out by men as a symbol of social status and often becomes a tool of political diplomacy between men; (4) Boys are prepared as successors to leaders with special clothing rules, while girls are not taken into account. An unequal power relationship exists between men and women. The role of men as leaders, who must be obeyed by their wives and children, reinforces the patriarchal gender ideology that is embedded in the culture of the Priangan nobility. In education and employment, there is a significant imbalance in roles. Women are prepared to spend most of their time at home, evidenced by their roles as educators and symbols of family honor, upholding ethics and grace. Meanwhile, men are prepared to occupy bureaucratic positions.

The patriarchal ideology among the Priangan nobility is quite identical to the concept of *kanca wingking* in Javanese culture, which explicitly states that women must be behind men (Bachtiar, 1985). Women among the Priangan nobility are powerless when faced with the reality of being forced to accept polygamy. Furthermore, daughters can be married off to other noble families as first wives or second wives, and so on. This further clarifies that women are nothing more than objects (others) to be controlled by men, or subjects (essentially), as *Bouvair* stated. In this context, daughters are controlled by their fathers as Regent. The objectification of women as a tool to strengthen the political power of the Priangan nobility through arranged marriages demonstrates that women's bodies are not the center of their lives, but rather vehicles for discourses that perpetuate established conditions (Nurhasanah & Syifa, 2021). These discourses leave women unaware that they are being controlled for the benefit of the nobility or male nobility. This is especially true for women of the nobility, who enjoy special privileges as nobles: elegance, kitchen assistance, and access to certain educations not accessible to women from commoner backgrounds. Weber defined this condition as domination, where the dominated individual feels as if the commands are coming from their own heart (Lukes, 1986). The gender inequality within the families of the Priangan regents is legitimized by several cultural constructs from outside Priangan. First, contact with Javanese culture (Islamic Mataram). Priangan was originally a region of the Sundanese Pajajaran Kingdom, but was successfully colonized by the Islamic Mataram Kingdom in the 17th century. The Sundanese kinship system is parental, not tracing paternal lineage and indirectly



recognizing the equality of women and men in life (Istianah, 2020). The Baduy tribe, as a representation of pure Sundanese culture, also does not place women in the domestic sphere because they work together in the fields. In Sundanese mythology, several women appear with leadership qualities, such as Dewi Nawangwulan and Dewi Rengganis (Ekadjati, 1984). The Javanese feudal culture brought to the Sunda region shifted the role and position of women to a weaker one (Istianah, 2020). Second is the influence of colonial government regulations. The Civil Code (Burgerlijk Wetboek), adopted from Dutch law, placed women under the authority of men, either as children under the authority of their fathers or as wives subject to their husbands (Sutherland, 1979). In practice, various government positions, from regents to district heads (wedana), and assistant wedanas, were appointed by the colonial government from among the Priangan aristocratic men. Throughout the history of Dutch colonial rule, no woman had ever formally held the title of district head. Istianah concludes that Dutch colonialism also contributed to shifting gender roles towards patriarchy (Istianah, 2020).

The common practice of polygamy was legitimized by Islamic teachings, the religion embraced by the Priangan nobility, a third influence. Nevertheless, Islam in many ways attempted to place women in a position of honor, such as the glorification of "Mother." Lubis confirms that, as intermediaries between the colonial government and local communities, the Priangan nobility integrated Islamic values into their social life and power structures, making them a deeply embedded part of their identity (Lubis, 1998). The role of women, who were not heads of families, political leaders, and largely confined to the home, strongly aligns with Islamic values. The three sources that influenced the culture of the Priangan nobility supported patriarchal gender relations. All three can be understood as a gender ideology capable of designing memories and thoughts that cause humans to believe that women and men are different. The power of patriarchy, supported by the legitimacy of three cultural influences (Javanese, Dutch, and Islamic culture), became the most powerful tool in reproducing unequal gender relations, because traditional values were often maintained without criticism (Fakih, 2020). This condition continued until 1942, the end of the Dutch colonial era, although there was an attempt to resist from Raden Dewi Sartika, it was not enough to break the status quo, especially efforts to involve women in government bureaucratic structures such as positions as regents.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research shows that although women from the Regent's family in Priangan held a respected position as members of the nobility, they remained objects of male dominance. Their roles were restricted to the domestic sphere, denied opportunities for bureaucratic leadership, and served as symbols of family honor. They were expected to appear elegant, prepared for polygamy, or married into other aristocratic families as a means of political diplomacy. Access to education was also directed more toward household skills and social etiquette than toward intellectual development through equal education. This gender construction was shaped by various external influences that shifted the previously more egalitarian Sundanese order: first, the influx of Javanese culture through the conquest of Priangan by the Islamic Mataram Kingdom; second, the legal policies of the Dutch colonial government; and third, the internalization of Islamic values as the majority religion. These findings confirm that during the colonial period, Priangan noblewomen experienced a process of restriction in social, political, and educational spheres. Based on these conclusions, the researchers suggest several things. First, further research is needed to determine how the legacy of colonial gender constructions still influences women's roles among the Sundanese nobility today. Second, comparative research with other regions in the archipelago can provide a broader perspective on gender dynamics within the context of colonialism. Third, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for gender studies, social history, and efforts to preserve Sundanese culture, ensuring that women's narratives are not overlooked in historical reconstructions.

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