



Construction of Women in Religious Relations and Social Change on the Indonesia-Singapore Border, Batam City, Riau Islands

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Abstract

This study explores the construction of women in religious relations and their role in social change on the Indonesia-Singapore border, specifically focusing on Batam City in the Riau Islands. The religious landscape of this region is diverse, with various religious practices and beliefs coexisting. Understanding the dynamics of gender within these religious contexts is crucial to comprehending how women navigate and contribute to social change. The research employs a qualitative approach, such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. By engaging with local communities, religious leaders, and women themselves, this study seeks to uncover the multifaceted roles women play within religious institutions and the broader society. The findings shed light on the ways in which women negotiate their religious identities, practices, and responsibilities, as well as the challenges they encounter in their pursuit of social change. The study also examines the impact of globalization and transnational connections on the construction of women's religious roles, exploring how women in Batam City are influenced by and respond to global trends and ideas. Furthermore, the research addresses the power dynamics at play within religious institutions and how they shape women's experiences and opportunities for social transformation. It investigates the agency exercised by women in religious leadership roles and grassroots initiatives, highlighting the strategies they employ to challenge existing gender norms and advocate for gender equality.

Keywords

Relation, religion, social change, border community

Abstrak

Studi ini mengeksplorasi konstruksi perempuan dalam hubungan keagamaan dan peran mereka dalam perubahan sosial di perbatasan Indonesia-Singapura, dengan fokus khusus pada Kota Batam di Kepulauan Riau. Lanskap keagamaan di wilayah ini sangat beragam, dengan berbagai praktik keagamaan dan kepercayaan yang hidup berdampingan. Memahami dinamika gender dalam konteks keagamaan ini sangat penting untuk memahami bagaimana perempuan menavigasi dan berkontribusi pada perubahan sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, seperti observasi, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen. Dengan melibatkan masyarakat lokal, pemimpin agama, dan perempuan itu sendiri, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap peran multifaset yang dimainkan perempuan dalam lembaga keagamaan dan masyarakat secara umum. Temuan penelitian ini memberikan pemahaman tentang bagaimana perempuan bernegosiasi terhadap identitas keagamaan mereka, praktik, dan tanggung jawab, serta tantangan yang mereka hadapi dalam upaya mereka untuk perubahan sosial. Penelitian ini juga mengkaji dampak globalisasi dan koneksi transnasional terhadap konstruksi peran keagamaan perempuan, mengeksplorasi bagaimana perempuan di Kota Batam dipengaruhi oleh dan merespons tren dan gagasan global. Selain itu, penelitian ini mengatasi dinamika kekuasaan yang berlangsung dalam lembaga keagamaan dan bagaimana hal tersebut membentuk pengalaman perempuan dan peluang mereka untuk transformasi sosial. Penelitian ini menyelidiki agensi yang dilakukan oleh perempuan dalam peran kepemimpinan keagamaan dan inisiatif grassroot, dengan menyoroti strategi yang mereka gunakan untuk menantang norma gender yang ada dan advokasi kesetaraan gender.

Kata Kunci

Relasi, agama, perubahan sosial, masyarakat perbatasan

Introduction

The community residing in Batam City, located on the Indonesian-Singapore border, is recognized for its adherence to traditional customs, cultural practices, and strong religious beliefs. Additionally, the community places high regard for women, viewing them as integral members of the family who require protection, nurturing,

and participation in the struggle to maintain respect and honor in society. The position and roles of women within the border community are still centered on household duties, such as cooking, childcare, and domestic upkeep (Niko, 2020). This is closely related to the patriarchal culture that remains deeply ingrained in community life, limiting girls' mobility and opportunities for free play in contrast to boys.

The construction of patriarchal culture in border communities is a consciously or unconsciously established tradition that is passed down to future generations from an early age. Within this context, it is not uncommon to find women with lower educational attainment than men in various social strata of society (Julaekhah, 2021). However, the situation of women with limited access to education in the Riau Islands is not limited to border communities alone, as it is also prevalent in the wider population (Niko, 2020).

The culture that confines women to domestic roles often results in early marriages, which are frequently arranged by parents, especially for those from lower-middle-class backgrounds. The vulnerability of girls from impoverished backgrounds who are married off early is not limited to border community cultures but is also prevalent in most rural subcultures (Niko, 2019). In some border community communities, early marriage has even become a normative cultural practice (Rahmaniah et al., 2022). Consequently, many women living in border areas are married before the age of 18, and some are even wed before the age of 15, resulting in early parenthood.

Overall, border communities maintain their long-standing traditions and customs, which have been passed down through generations (Arieta et al., 2022; Wiemar et al., 2022). According to previous research, patriarchal culture continues to be deeply entrenched in border communities. Practices such as child marriage, female circumcision, and polygamy are some examples of patriarchal cultures that render women vulnerable to victimization within these communities.

Over time, border communities have been moving towards a more modernized direction, especially due to their proximity to Singapore. With the advent of advanced information technology, social changes are being strongly felt in these communities. There are several factors that contribute to social change, including contact with other cultures, an advanced formal education system, appreciation for someone's work and progressive desires, an open system of social stratification, and a heterogeneous population. Direct or indirect contact with other cultures can lead to social and cultural changes, such as the influence of foreign communities in certain areas and the internet that spreads the influence of foreign cultures. An advanced formal education system is an important factor in bringing about change towards a better direction as it increases the human resources of a place, enabling them to use their environment more effectively and efficiently. Appreciation for someone's work and progressive desires can also lead to social change as every action is initiated by a desire, and the desire to progress leads individuals to develop towards a better direction. An open system of social stratification provides opportunities for individuals to advance based on their own abilities, allowing for wide vertical social mobility. In lower-status groups, there is often a feeling of dissatisfaction with their own social position, which can lead to status anxiety and a strive to increase one's social position. Additionally, communities consisting of social groups with different cultural, racial, and ideological backgrounds may experience conflicts that cause instability, which can encourage changes in society (Ballard & Barnett, 2023).

The conventional family structure prevalent in societies that adhere to patriarchal systems assigns women exclusively to domestic responsibilities, thereby rendering them inferior in terms of skills and negotiation abilities (Nursaptini et al., 2019). Consequently, certain cultural practices and religious principles tend to undermine the status of women, resulting in their being unable to compete effectively (Vuspitasari & Ewid, 2020). Given the research gaps that exist in this area, the author's focus is on investigating the ways in which religion influences the social evolution of women.

The present study aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the novel aspects of the construction of women in religious relations and social change in the border community of Batam City, Riau Islands, Indonesia, shedding light on the intersections of patriarchal culture, religion, and social change in a region where these issues have been underexplored.

Method

The present study employs a descriptive qualitative method and focuses on the construction of women in the context of religious relations and social change in Belakang Padang District, Batam City. The study primarily relies on observation and interviews as the data collection techniques to gain insights into the lived experiences of



the border community. Given the proximity of Batam City to Singapore, this location was deemed suitable for the research. Purposive sampling was used to select four native women (all of them are marriage women) who have been residing in the border area for an extended period as the study participants. An interview guide was prepared and subsequently refined into a framework of questions during the field research.

Result and Discussion

Result

Border Island Profil

The classified of border regions is alienated, coexistent, interdependent, and integrated. The first type pertains to regions where no interaction or relationship between groups exists due to state conflicts, wars, political or nationalist issues, ideological differences, and cultural and ethnic disparities. As a result, cooperation is weak, population density is low, and spatial development is minimal. The second type, coexistent border regions, is marked by the cessation of open conflicts, but border regions still do not engage in cooperation and interactions are minimal. This is due to emotional barriers, unclear boundary status, and the presence of national boundary lines (Casiavera et al., 2023). Cooperation may occur in economic, cultural, or policy areas, but it is dependent on bilateral or international agreements that accept national boundary lines and statuses.

The third type, interdependent border regions, describes a border area where peaceful cooperation has been established, and social, cultural, and economic interactions occur reciprocally, as evidenced by cross-border cooperation in the movement of people, goods, and capital. Economic activities in both areas are interdependent, as the cooperating regions have the same level of socio-economic development. The fourth type, integrated border regions, refers to a border area where economic activities and social relationships are not hindered by borders or national boundaries. The movement of people, goods, services, and capital takes place intensively and freely, and both countries become allies in economic development, with nationalism merging into international ideology.

In accordance with Martinez's categorization, the border areas in West Kalimantan can be generally classified as the third type. This is evident in the positive cooperation and peaceful interactions among communities in the border areas, which are mutually interdependent. Despite this, there is a visible disparity in social welfare and economic development between the Indonesian and Singaporean border areas, as observed through various aspects such as education, infrastructure development, and human resources. The Riau Islands' border areas, for instance, lag far behind Singapore in terms of marine and island infrastructure, electricity distribution, and road infrastructure development. The road infrastructure, in particular, is significantly limited compared to Singapore, where almost all roads are already paved and interconnected throughout the region.

In the context of the Indonesia-Malaysia border, there are observable disparities between the communities living in the border areas and those in central areas (Niko & Sumaya, 2021). Specifically, people from various regions of Indonesia often work as laborers in Singapore through Batam, while Singaporeans rarely work as laborers in Batam. This disparity is indicative of differing levels of economic development between the two areas. Additionally, there is a prevalent perspective that the border communities are less advanced and outdated, which leads to a sense of alienation among them. This perspective further contributes to the tendency for people in border areas to orient themselves towards Sarawak, resulting in stronger connections with the neighboring country than their own (Niko & Sumaya, 2021).

The border communities in the Riau Islands have been engaged in trading activities for a significant amount of time. These communities sell their catch to Singaporean ships and trade Singaporean goods through unofficial routes or footpaths, which is referred to as smokel or smuggling. Smokel is a natural result of the lack of economic opportunities for local communities due to inadequate national border management. This phenomenon is prevalent in most Indonesian border areas neighboring other countries (Niko & Purnama, 2020).

In the Batam region, a variety of products from Singapore, such as snacks, basic commodities like rice, onions, oil, sugar, and spices, as well as beef and electronic goods, are sold. The sale of these goods was previously conducted by small traders, but the smokel activity has become more organized, with the establishment of shops in Batam serving as suppliers of Singaporean goods to small traders outside the border district. As an example, middlemen from Kasu Island conduct smokel activities by purchasing Singaporean products, including onions, sugar, cigarettes, and meat, using motorboats.

Discussion

The Position of Women in The Traditions of Frontier Peoples

The position of women within the traditions of frontier peoples has been a topic of significant interest and scholarly inquiry. Frontier regions are characterized by their remote and often challenging environments, where communities develop unique cultural practices and social structures shaped by their distinct histories, geographical locations, and encounters with neighboring groups. Understanding the role of women in these traditions provides valuable insights into the dynamics of gender, power, and identity in societies that exist at the margins.

The utilization of a conventional equipment system in the border area community has become an ingrained cultural practice that endures over time. Women in the community employ a stove as a primary cooking tool, which necessitates the use of dry firewood, matches, and kerosene as fuel sources. In the event that kerosene is unavailable, the community has resorted to utilizing discarded tires cut into small pieces to generate fire. This substitutionary practice is undertaken as a cost-saving measure given the increasing scarcity of kerosene, which some merchants sell at inflated prices, thereby exacerbating the challenges faced by the people of Batam.

Despite the prevalence of modern gas stoves, traditional stoves continue to be utilized by numerous individuals, as they have been for centuries. Traditional stoves are still employed for a multitude of purposes, including the boiling of potable water and the preparation of large-scale meals for significant events such as religious ceremonies, weddings, and other major occasions. Even in the absence of an indoor stove, individuals will construct outdoor cooking facilities to meet their culinary needs.

The familial structure in border communities is established with the objective of promoting a sense of equilibrium and concordance. This framework assigns the father as the head of the household, the mother as the primary caregiver, and the children as integral components of the family unit. As the patriarchal figure, the father is responsible for providing leadership, and his decisions are expected to be decisive and unwavering. He shoulders the onus of directing the actions of his family members, and as the sole provider, he serves as the bedrock of the family's financial stability. In this region, the primary source of income is typically derived from the husband's labor, with any contribution made by the wife viewed as supplementary.

The mother or woman in the household is entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining the household in the absence of the father, who is typically occupied with earning a livelihood for the family. A crucial aspect of the mother's role is to instill values and principles in her children, and she must lead by example during their formative years. Moreover, she must possess adept financial management skills to ensure judicious allocation of resources towards the family's necessities, children's education, and personal expenses. However, in the border region, few mothers or women engage in secondary employment, which is primarily performed during their leisure time after fulfilling domestic duties. These activities are typically time-efficient, such as supporting their husbands in the trade or acquisition of fish from the sea.

The kinship system represents a social entity composed of multiple families linked by blood or marital ties. This interconnectedness is established through the marriage of two distinct kinship groups, resulting in the amalgamation of these entities into a cohesive whole. The strength of kinship bonds in border communities is robust, as these individuals place a high value on interpersonal relationships. Following the consolidation of the two families, they endeavor to sustain their connection through effective communication. In times of hardship, such as natural disasters or unforeseen events, they band together to provide mutual support. This solidarity extends to significant life milestones, including weddings, religious ceremonies, and other momentous occasions, where they offer assistance and share in the joyous celebrations.

Cooking proficiency is deemed an obligatory skill for women in border communities. The prevailing belief is that daughters must possess this culinary acumen, as cooking is viewed as an integral aspect of a woman's duties. Women are expected to embody this notion and regard cooking proficiency as an innate trait that they must possess. The community adheres to the philosophy that being a good woman entails the ability to cater to her husband's needs by providing nourishment to the family through food preparation. Consequently, the community has embraced this viewpoint, resulting in the widespread expectation that women must be able to cook.



Religious Relations and Social Change in Looking at Women at The Border

The construction of women in religious relations is a topic of significant importance and relevance in today's society. Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' beliefs, values, and social interactions, and it often presents a framework through which gender roles and identities are defined and understood. Understanding the construction of women within religious contexts is crucial for comprehending their experiences, agency, and contributions to their communities and society at large. Religious institutions, practices, and teachings have historically played a role in shaping and reinforcing gender norms and hierarchies. Women have often been assigned specific roles and responsibilities within religious frameworks, which can vary significantly across different faiths and cultures. These constructions can both empower and constrain women, influencing their opportunities for leadership, participation, and decision-making within religious communities.

Moreover, the construction of women in religious relations intersects with broader societal dynamics and social change. Women's experiences within religious contexts are not isolated from the social, cultural, and political transformations occurring in the wider world. As societies evolve, women navigate the tension between traditional religious norms and emerging social expectations, often challenging existing gender roles and advocating for gender equality within their religious communities.

The construction of women in religious relations is a complex and multifaceted process. It involves examining how women negotiate their religious identities, roles, and practices within the boundaries set by religious traditions. It also entails understanding the challenges women face in asserting their agency and exercising leadership within religious institutions, as well as the strategies they employ to challenge and transform patriarchal norms and structures.

Additionally, globalization and transnational connections have significantly impacted the construction of women's roles within religious contexts. Ideas, trends, and debates from around the world now shape and influence local religious practices, beliefs, and discourses. Women in religious relations in contemporary society are increasingly engaging with these global influences, adapting and reinterpreting religious teachings to promote gender equality and social justice.

The construction of women in religious relations is a complex and evolving phenomenon. Understanding the ways in which women navigate and contribute to religious communities and the broader society is essential for promoting gender equality, social change, and the empowerment of women. By critically examining the dynamics of gender within religious contexts and acknowledging the agency and contributions of women, we can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable religious spaces that reflect the diversity and aspirations of all individuals.

According to Syam (2022), the relationship between religion and society can be viewed from two perspectives: the influence of religion on society and the influence of society on religion. In the border society of Belakang Padang District, Batam City, traditional values and taboos continue to be observed. For instance, it is taboo to walk alone without a companion, and idleness is forbidden because it is believed to lead to marrying an indolent person. Additionally, women are expected to possess expertise in household affairs; otherwise, they may not be considered desirable as wives. This cultural and religious practice, which confines women's roles to the domestic sphere, is a system of restraint that limits their freedom of choice and access to resources.

In practical terms, religion has been demonstrated to play a significant role in the lives of individuals. It serves as a guide for daily life and is a ubiquitous aspect of society. Religion also has a significant impact on community life, acting as a spiritual and moral source (Syam, 2022). In the Belakang Padang District of Batam City, traditional values and taboos persist, which influence the behavior of individuals. For example, it is considered taboo to walk alone without a companion, and being lazy is prohibited as it is believed that marrying a lazy person is inevitable. Women are expected to be proficient in household tasks, as not doing so may result in being unable to find a suitable spouse. The legitimacy of cultural and religious beliefs that restrict women to domestic roles limits their freedom to access resources and make their own choices. The social norms in this society are particularly strict for women, who are prohibited from meeting male guests without their husband's knowledge, as it is related to their reputation in the community. This implies that women do not have the same level of freedom as men, and there are etiquettes that cannot be broken without inviting criticism from the surrounding community.

The society living in the borderland region, which is deeply rooted in religious values, particularly Islamic beliefs, tends to prioritize religious education over general education, as per the study conducted by Rahmaniah et al., (2022). For them, possessing good morals and knowledge of religious teachings is sufficient, and thus it is mandatory for their children, including girls, to be able to recite the Quran. Consequently, the borderland community favors sending their children to Islamic boarding schools to gain higher knowledge of religion.

According to Syam (2022), social change is a theoretical concept that encompasses two aspects: continuity and change. In the process of social change, there are instances where the external factors change while the internal factors remain the same, which is known as continuity in sociological terms. Continuity amid change is a key component in every social change, where certain aspects of society persist even as changes occur.

In all societies, whether traditional or modern, change is an ongoing process that follows the existing social developments. The aim of change is to improve the quality of life by creating various technologies that meet complex needs. Social change is significantly impacted by the community's behavior and mindset, and if these changes are not accompanied by the rules and norms of society that have been held for generations, national values may also change. Budijarto (2018) suggests that this highlights the importance of firmly holding on to these values and norms to preserve the community's identity, which is particularly crucial for border communities to maintain their Indonesian identity.

Academic Paraphrase: Social change can be instigated by internal and external factors within a society, as identified by Budijarto (2018). Social institutions, including those related to governance, economics, and religious education, play an important role as channels for social change to take place. These institutions can either drive or hinder social change depending on their actions and policies.

In border communities, the cultural norm is for both males and females to be proficient in Quranic recitation, despite the prevailing belief that only males need to have this skill for daily life. This is due to a societal construct that prioritizes boys' attendance in higher education over girls. However, in reality, the ability to recite the Quran is mandatory for both genders. Even if they do not attend a pesantren or receive Quranic instruction, it is customary for parents to teach their children Quranic recitation after the congregational evening prayer, and this tradition persists until today.

The verse from Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 30 in the Quran, mentions Allah's intention to establish a successive authority on Earth. The term khalifah in this verse is commonly understood to refer to Adam, who represents humanity. However, according to Al-Zamakhsyari's interpretation, the meaning of khalifah in this verse extends beyond Adam and includes all individuals who are responsible for enforcing Allah's will on Earth.

Another verse of the Quran, Surah An-Naml verse 23, mentions the queen who ruled the Saba people, famously known as Balqis, where Allah says Verily, I found a woman ruling over them, and she has been given of everything, and she has a great throne. This verse highlights that Balqis, as a female leader, was able to bring prosperity and peace to her people. This demonstrates that women have the capacity and capability to become successful leaders (Purnama et al., 2021).

The pursuit of gender equality is not only recognized in religious texts but also enshrined in Indonesian law, specifically in the Human Rights Law Number 39 Article 15, which grants individuals the right to pursue personal and collective development and to contribute to the development of society, nation, and country without discrimination. However, to fully embrace gender equality, beyond legal provisions, it is crucial to foster and promote practices that support a gender-neutral way of life.

While religion can be a source of empowerment for women, it can also be used to justify patriarchal practices that limit their participation in social, economic, and political spheres. It has become evident that religion plays a significant role in shaping the values and norms that dictate the lives of people living in these communities.

Despite the patriarchal norms that exist in border communities, it is important to acknowledge the positive changes that have taken place over time. For example, the Quranic verse that emphasizes the importance of women's education and leadership highlights that women have always had the potential to become agents of change. This, coupled with the formalization of gender equality in Indonesia's legal system, is a step towards promoting gender-neutral practices and bridging the gap between theory and practice.



Moving forward, it is essential to continue the conversation surrounding the intersections between religion, gender, and social change. This includes creating safe spaces for women to express their opinions and concerns, addressing patriarchal practices in religious teachings and interpretations, and promoting gender equality in all spheres of life. By doing so, we can ensure that border communities thrive and progress in a manner that is inclusive and equitable for all members.

Conclusions

Women's lives in border areas are the result of the construction of patriarchal values that are embedded in their daily lives. The differences in roles, functions, and access between men and women in their lives are cultural constructions that are continuously constructed. As a result, there has been a shift in the role of women, who used to be mostly in the domestic sphere, but now they are starting to be free to engage in activities outside the home without having to be accompanied by their husbands.

As time goes by, entering the reform era in Indonesia which is part of the social changes, it turns out that these changes occur due to the influence of globalization resulting from the development of the global environment supported by advances in information technology. Today, the existence of border women who have begun to be free to engage in activities in the public sphere such as working, becoming employees in the Village Office, and becoming civil servants has started to exist even though it may only be one or two people. This means that collective awareness has emerged, both among men who realize that women's place is not just in the domestic sphere, and awareness by women themselves that they are capable and become part of empowering themselves.

Based on our research findings, we suggest for future research examining the role of social media and other digital technologies in shaping gender relations in the border area. With the increasing use of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, it is likely that these technologies are playing a significant role in shaping the way that women are perceived and constructed in the public sphere.

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