

THOU SHOULD SUBMIT TO YOUR HUSBAND: GENDER-ROLE IDEOLOGY OF CHURCH LEADERS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Patriarchal culture has infiltrated many social, psychological, and historical aspects of Indonesian societies, including religious life. This study focuses on gender-role ideology of church leaders in Surabaya, Indonesia. As the second largest religion in Indonesia, Christian teachings influence 9.5% (or more than 19 million people) of Indonesian population. In this study, eight leaders of eight churches in Surabaya are involved in semi-structured interviews, in order to reveal various aspects of their gender-role ideology. The member of these churches range from 1,000 to 17,000 people. The total number of people committed in these churches exceeds 30,000 people. The results show that most of the leaders believe in moderately egalitarian gender-role ideology. The most egalitarian aspects are privilege of man and household utility, while the most traditional are primacy of husband as breadwinner. The strongest traditional view – which is often overlooked by gender theories – is regarding the preference of male leadership both in spiritual, church, and family context. This is due to a Bible verse, Ephesians 5:22 – the most frequently cited verse by these church leaders in explaining male-female relationship – which explicitly states: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord”. Although there are feminist interpretations on that verse, they are not known by most of these leaders. Feminist theology is still a minority approach in interpreting Bible among churches in Indonesia. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: gender-role ideology, church leaders, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal culture has infiltrated social, psychological, and historical aspects of Indonesian societies, including religion. To better understand these social realities, more empirical studies are needed to explore the interconnectedness of gender and religion issues in Indonesia.

Religion teaches social norms to its adherents (Stassen & Gushee, 2003). Religion determines which behaviors are good and not good, which behaviors are right and wrong. The topics of marriage, family relationship, male-female roles, and child rearing are always incorporated in religious doctrines. Thus, discussing gender equality can not be separated from one’s religious beliefs.

This study focuses on Christianity - religion with the second largest adherents in Indonesia after Moslems. The number of Christians in Indonesia is 19,906,679 people

or 9.5% of Indonesian population (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2005). Specifically, the participants of this study are members of Christian churches in Surabaya, East Java.¹

There are scriptures in the Bible which explicitly encourage gender inequality. For instance, the story of God cursing Eve after the fall of man in Genesis 3:16: “To the woman he said: ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, *and he will rule over you.*’ (emphasis added)” (New International Version [NIV], Elshof, 2003). The sentence “he will rule over you” implies male authority in the family power structure. Another scripture asserts domestic role of women: “Then they can train younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, *to be busy at home*, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the

word of God.” (emphasis added) (Titus 2: 4-5, NIV version, Elshof, 2003). This verse is the foundation of the teaching that noble and respectable women should be married, have children, do domestic works, and be submissive to the husband. Another part of the Bible explains the role of women in church: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” (I Timothy 2: 12-13, NIV version, Elshof, 2003). This verse is the foundation of preference of male leadership in Christian churches. However, there are various interpretations of Biblical scriptures, including feminist interpretations. For instance, Grady (2004) argues that Paul’s assertion in I Timothy 2:12-13 is aimed to a group of female sect in Timothy’s church rather than to all women in all ages.

One’s belief regarding the role of man and woman (i.e. gender-role ideology) affects several other variables. Davis and Greenstein (2009) review 20 years of academic findings in this field and find that gender-role ideology significantly influences fathers’ involvement in childrearing, perceived fairness in domestic work division, household stability, quality of marital relationship, domestic violence, children’s education attainment, and types of children’s career. Considering these implications, empirical data on the church’s teachings regarding gender-role ideology is critical to be studied.

The dearth of empirical data on this issue encouraged the author to conduct this study. This research focuses on the teachings related to gender-role ideology of Christian churches in Surabaya. The participants are top leaders or the heads of teaching department who are eligible to explain church’s teachings. Gender-role ideology is defined as the “belief about the roles of man and woman which are socially and culturally constructed” (Fakih, 1996, p. 8). One’s gender-role ideology can be

categorized into egalitarian gender-role ideology – which believes that man and woman should be equal, and traditional gender-role ideology – which believes that man and woman should not be equal. The aspects of gender-role ideology explored in this study are based on Davis and Greenstein’s review article (2009), which consists of (1) the primacy of breadwinner, (2) gendered separate spheres, (3) motherhood and the feminine self, (4) working women and relationship quality, (5) household utility, and (6) the acceptance of male privilege.

METHOD

The participants in this study are eight leaders from eight churches in Surabaya, Indonesia. The member of these churches range from 1,000 to 17,000 people. The total number of people committed in these churches exceeds 30,000 people. Qualitative data are collected through audio-taped semi-structured interviews. The leaders interviewed are the top leader of the church or the head of teaching department who are capable to explain the doctrines or teachings of the church. Six participants are male leaders, two are female leaders. Although the interview guide focused on six aspects of gender-role ideology by Davis & Greenstein (2009), the interviewer opened to new findings during the interviews, such as the Biblical verses used by the interviewees, specific church programs to deliver those teachings, and other aspects of Christian-specific gender role which are not included in Davis and Greenstein’s work (2009).

The analysis involves transcription of interview tapes, categorization of major themes, and elaboration of the relationship among the themes.

RESULT

This section explains the findings of this study. First, I describe the teaching of

these churches based on six aspects of gender role ideology by Davis and Greenstein (2009). Then I explain specific church programs used by these churches to deliver the teachings regarding gender role. Lastly, I identify several specific issues of Christian male-female relationship such as the male leadership in family and spiritual context, the interpretations of Ephesians 5:22, and domestic violence.

The Primacy of Breadwinner

From the eighth churches, one church leader believes that man must be the breadwinner and one leader states that both man and woman can be the breadwinner equally.

“Man is the head of the family. The essence of head of the family is breadwinning.” (Leader of Church B)

“It is all about choice. I absolutely don’t mind if the woman works and the man doing house chores. The problem is, our society is not accustomed to see this kind of family. It’s all about choice and anticipated consequences. Personally I say it is okay.” (Leader of Church F)

The rest of the leaders (six out of eight) encourage man to be the breadwinner but it can be discussed, depend on the conditions.

“In normal condition, I suggest the man to be the breadwinner. But if the condition is different, such as severe health problem, of course it can be discussed.” (Leader of Church D)

“Bible does not restrict women to work. But the stories in the Old

Testament show us that the role of man is outside the home and women in domestic works. New Testament doesn’t mention anything about working women. But of course we know why God creates woman with womb, because He wants woman to take care of the children and family.” (Leader of Church H)

This finding shows that the majority of church leaders believe in relatively traditional gender role that breadwinner role is mainly belong to man, although in certain conditions it can be discussed.

Gendered Separate Spheres

Three leaders believe that there are separated spheres for man and woman, and they should not switching positions in these separated spheres.

“It is naturally separated. As we can see, there are jobs that are better performed by women, not by men, and vice versa. The separation reflects the natural role of man and woman.” (Leader of Church H)

On the other hand, three other leaders believe that there should not be separated spheres for man and woman.

“There are no separated spheres. In this church we even accept female security guards and drivers. All ministry fields are open to both men and women.” (Leader of Church A)

The rest two leaders believe that separated or not separated spheres depend on the context.

“In terms of career I don’t believe in the gendered separated spheres. But in the family context, there are separated role. Man as the leader, woman as the helper.” (Leader of Church D)

The data demonstrate that the eight church leaders in Surabaya are distributed to both egalitarian and traditional gender role ideology in the aspect of gendered separated spheres.

Motherhood and the Feminine Self

In the aspect of motherhood and feminine self, the voices of church leaders are also divided into both traditional and egalitarian perspectives. Four leaders believe that woman should bear and nurture child(ren) except in the case of disability of pregnancy. While other four leaders argue that decision to having or not having children is a matter of choice.

“I totally disagree when women don’t want to have children. The book of Genesis clearly states that God commands us to have children, grandchildren, and fill the earth. The women are the only human species which have womb, if they don’t want to have babies, who else?” (Leader of Church G)

“The command in the book of Genesis is given when the earth was empty. So it is no longer relevant. I believe it’s all about choice. Decisions to have lots of children, few children, and even decision to live celibate are all about choice.” (Leader of Church E)

In these interview quotations, the difference in viewing the importance of motherhood is based on different interpretations of Bible scriptures. In this case, the same verse is interpreted differently.

Working Women and Relationship Quality

Can a woman has a good career and also maintain the quality of family relationship? Four church leaders believe that positive relationship still can be established as long as there is commitment. For instance, leader of Church F considers the economic disempowerment while women are restricted from work.

“Nothing wrong with working mother. It’s all about choice, consequence, and commitment, including child development. I personally encourage women to work, because husbands often feel okay to have an affair, because he knows his wife can not survive economically without him.” (Leader of Church F)

Two other leaders argue that family relationship, most importantly child development, is sacrificed when women work. The rest two leaders assert that working women is acceptable, but maintaining family relationship is paramount for all women.

“The ideal condition is women nurture the children. If the mother works fulltime, the children will be sacrificed. Biologically God has created women, not men, to bear and nurture children” (Leader of Church H)

“Working woman is economically beneficial, but the quality of relationship, communication,

affection – which are more important – can be sacrificed. I suggest women to find flexible or part time job. I've seen many cases of juvenile delinquency, drugs, etc because the mother is working full time.” (Leader of Church D)

The beliefs of these church leaders regarding working women and relationship quality are mixed; some are egalitarian, some are traditional.

Household Utility

Five out of eight church leaders assert egalitarian division of domestic works. Their arguments are based on the commitment of love between husband and wife, same as Christ and church.

“The essence of a normal Christian family is love. Love willing to give up one's life for someone he/she loves. Just like Christ. But give up life is the last step, isn't it? Before you give up your life, you can give your hands, your time, your energy, including doing house chores. It doesn't matter, I myself doing house chores. ” (Leader of Church H [male])

While the other three state that there are no Biblical principles which forbid male to do house chores. But it is socially undesirable for a man doing domestic works, especially in public sphere.

“I really appreciate husbands who willingly help doing house chores. Although I believe it should be done by women. One day I told a member of my church to stop her husband washing clothes in front of the house. It is okay if it's done in

the back of the house. Although it is not stated in the Bible, but it is socially not good.” (Leader of Church G)

Acceptance of Male Privilege

In this aspect of male privilege, all church leaders agree on one egalitarian statement: there is no male privilege.

“Javanese culture places male very high in the society. For example, in government documents we are never being asked who the head of the family is, they always fill that item with the father's name. Another example, when a husband go outside the house, the wife has no rights to ask where have he been. But when the wife takes a walk for moment outside the house without permission, the husband will furiously interrogate her when she came back. I think it is not right. It is not what God wants for us.” (Leader of Church F)

The findings above show that gender role ideology is not a single and simple concept. There are complexities in the way of believing the role of man and woman. The church leaders in this study believe in relatively egalitarian perspective in terms of male privilege and household utility; relatively traditional perspective in the aspect of primacy of breadwinner; while in terms of gendered separated spheres, working women and relationship quality, and motherhood, the beliefs of church leaders are varied.

Programs to Deliver Teachings

There are various activities these churches use to deliver teachings regarding gender role. I classify all the activities into five types of programs/media.

Premarital classes/counseling/seminars. Almost all churches in this study have compulsory programs for couples who want to be married in the church. The activities differ from 10-week premarital classes, seminars, discussion groups, to 4-session premarital counseling. The teachings regarding marriage, sexuality, and male-female relationship are delivered in these sessions.

Regular teaching classes/sermons/small-group lessons. Another powerful medium these churches use to teach the congregants about gender role is regular lecture/discussion such as teaching classes, sermons, and small-group lesson. Although they are not specifically designated to teach gender issue, but these leaders address that values and principles related to gender are delivered indirectly in these activities. A simple example or stories during the sermon can reflect several values and teachings regarding gender-role.

Special classes/seminars/camps. Some churches have special programs to help their member understand the teachings regarding how men and women should behave. Church A has "Parenting Class", Church B conducts "Family Ethics Class", and Church G has "Men's Camp" and "Women's Camp". Most of these programs focus on the functions of man and woman in the family.

Books and radio broadcastings. Church D, Church F, and Church H publish several books related to male-female relationship. There are popular books, teaching books, and also daily devotional books. Church D also have radio program which specifically discuss male-female relationship. The program mainly focuses on family issue.

Women Empowerment Commission. Another medium to deliver teachings regarding gender is a department in the church structure which called Women Empowerment Commission. Only Church C and Church F have this department. The

activities in this department are seminars, discussions, and surveys.

Leadership in Family, Church, and Spiritual Context

As I discussed above, the churches involved in this study are relatively not traditional in viewing gender, based on six aspect of gender role ideology by Davis and Greenstein (2009). But I found a strong theme arose during the interview, reflecting traditional gender ideology i.e. association of man with leadership role in family, church, and spiritual context.

"The nature of man is leader. The nature of woman is housewife. Father is the head of the family, meaning, the priest of the family. He is responsible to lead the whole family members to God." (Leader of Church C)

"The basic nature of man is leader – head of the family, the owner of authority in a system. The authority of woman is a helper – helps the implementation of male authority. Leader should be male. Sometimes in business or professional context, women have better performances due to better trainings or experiences. But in the family, father is the leader. Also in the church. God usually gives vision to men, not women. Men are more rational in decision making, aren't they?" (Leader of Church D)

"According to the Bible, man is the head, woman is the body." (Leader of Church H)

Six churches believe that man is the leader in family, spiritual, and church context; but not in the professional career.

Church A believes in leadership equality in church institution, but not in family and spiritual context.

"We have no regulations limiting women to be the leader in the church. There is no difference in career and ministry, but in family, man is the leader." (Leader of Church A)

Only leader of Church F believes equality in leadership both in family, spiritual, and church context.

"I disagree with the statement that man is the head of the family. Anyone can be the head of the family. It's okay for the man to be the head as long as it's based on agreement." (Leader of Church F)

All of the eight churches acknowledge and accept female pastors and elders. However, female leaders are still institutionally disadvantaged compared to their male counterpart. For instance, in the Church B, female pastor are allowed to conduct blessing prayer and holy sacraments (both baptism and holy communion) only if there are no male pastor in the same or higher level attends the sermon. And, if both husband and wife are pastors, the top leadership role in the church structure must belong to the husband. In Church D, even if the wife demonstrates better talents and spiritual gifts, the one who must show up in public or in front of the congregation is the husband.

The root of this strong association of man and leadership role lies in one Bible verse. Correspondingly, the same verse is the

most frequently cited verse by church leaders during the interview sessions. I discuss this verse in the next section, including various interpretations regarding the word "leader" and "submit" according to them.

Ephesians 5:22 – Thou Should Submit to Your Husband

The book of Ephesians is a book in the New Testament, written by Apostle Paul - who writes more than half of the New Testament. A passage in the book of Ephesians chapter 5 entitled "Wives and Husbands" comprises practical advices for Ephesians Christian families. The verse 22-24 state (NIV version, Elshof, 2003): "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything".

Leader of Church H explains:

"This verse is the foundation of the family institution. The husband loves the wife, the wife submits to the husband. That's how it should be. Just like Christ and church. The husband is the head, the leader; wife is the helper".

During the interview, two questions arose on this statement: what does it mean to be "the head" and what does "submit" mean?

Church leaders give various interpretations on these two questions. Most leaders agree that the essence of leadership is decision making, and the leadership style should not be authoritarian.

"The head of the family means decision maker, role model, protector, and priest." (Leader of Church A)

“The head of the family means decision maker, but he must be democratic not authoritarian.” (Leader of Church E)

“Husband must lead with love, not like a dictator, because the essence or the root of the relationship is love. The decision taken must be in accordance with the Bible.” (Leader of Church H)

The interpretation of “submit” is also varied. The majority interprets “submit” as an acknowledgement to the leadership role of the husband and cooperation in a good way. These church leaders also emphasize the importance of avoiding leadership abuse.

“Submit means put the husband more than herself in everything.” (Leader of Church B)

“Acknowledge the husband as the decision maker. But don’t forget that God creates women as ‘the equal helper’. So I’m not teaching ‘blind submission’ in which the wife not saying her opinion at all.” (Leader of Church G)

“Submit, but not ‘stupid submission’! If you have a better idea than his idea, put your idea into his mouth. Give him a face.” (Leader of Church E)

“Submit means able to cooperate, not fighting or arguing all the time. But submission is not ‘being like a doormat’ (you let your rights violated). Remember, the head of wife is husband and the head of husband is Jesus. If the decision is inconsistent with the Bible, the wife should not follow that decision.” (Leader of Church H)

Seven church leaders agree that husband is the head of family. They accept the traditional power structure, but they are very concern of violations in this power structure; both the wife violating husband’s leadership authority, and the husband violating commitment of leading with love.

Domestic Violence: What should the victims do?

The problem I argued with these leaders is: the marginalized position of wives in this power relation can lead to helplessness when violation happens. The most obvious example is domestic violence. Within that power structure, very few options can be done by the wives when domestic violence happens.

“There is no divorce in Christianity. Divorce is not an option in the case of domestic violence. We suggest temporary separation, taking time to contemplate. We offer counseling for both husband and wife to save the marriage. However, the book of Rome says that church is under the authority of government too. So if the law decided, we must comply.” (Leader of Church E)

“I never suggest a wife to report domestic violence to the police. But it is up to the family. This is related to public law, church can not intervene. I personally suggest the wife to avoid vulnerable situations, be patience, and pray. The book of Corinthians says that a good wife can save the husband.” (Leader of Church G)

These leaders assert the compliance to law as a good Christian, although they prefer to solve the problem by prayer and counseling. Saving the marriage is one of the most important concerns.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study shows that the church leaders in this study believe in relatively egalitarian perspective in terms of male privilege and household utility; relatively

traditional perspective in the aspect of primacy of breadwinner; while in terms of gendered separated spheres, working women and relationship quality, and motherhood, the beliefs of church leaders are varied. They shared a traditional perspective in viewing male leadership role in family, church, and spiritual contexts, as explicitly indicated by the scripture of Ephesians 5:22.

Based on the finding I have described, in this section I discuss several issues of gender equality in Indonesian Christians context.

Feminist Theology: A Gate to Gender Equality

The church leaders I interviewed show some extent of disagreement in explaining gender role ideology (except for male privilege aspects and male leadership role in family and spiritual context). Their disagreement based on the difference in interpreting Biblical verses. For instance, the verse in Genesis 1: 28a about God's command to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (NIV version, Elshof, 2003) is interpreted differently by Leader of Church E and Church G, resulting in different teaching regarding motherhood and procreation. Biblical texts, as any other texts, are opened to multiple interpretations. There are traditional, feminists, and other interpretations (Brayford, n.d.).

However, there is similarity among all church leaders, i.e. their "centrality of Biblical authority on the issue of women in church and society" (Quebedeaux, as cited in Kohm, 2008, p. 348). All the leaders support most of their arguments using Bible scriptures. The implication of this finding is that the struggle for gender equality among Indonesian Christian must start with theological discussions.

Some feminist theologians offer interpretations which often overlooked by these Indonesian church leaders. For instance,

the story of Samaritan woman in the book of John demonstrates Jesus' revolutionary approach toward gender, marital status, and ethnicity at that time. Jesus also permitted women, including low social status women, to travel with Him and witnessed His work on earth including His resurrection - in a culture where women are not legitimate to witness in the court (Kohm, 2008). These stories are often overlooked because the social situations in this time are different to Jesus' time.

Unfortunately, only a few biblical feminist organizations in Indonesia and their activities are not heard. My additional interview with the leader of Women Empowerment Commission in the Church C (personal communication) reveals that even pastors in her church are not agreeing each other in terms of the importance of gender equality teachings in the church's agenda. Feminist theology is still a minority approach among Indonesian churches.

Positive Family Functioning: A Principal Issue

The next concern demonstrated by the church leaders, after the centrality of biblical authority, is positive family functioning. Both churches adopting egalitarian and traditional power structure emphasize the importance of positive family functioning, where there are respect and care, and not violating of one's wellbeing. Historically, Bendroth (1999) argues that Protestantism is mainly pro-family.

This can be seen from how these leaders interpret "husband as the head" and "wives should submit". Leader of Church E and Church H assert that male leadership must be "democratic", "rooted in love", and "in accordance with the Bible". The submission of the wives is also framed in careful definitions: "not a blind submission" (leader of church G), "not a stupid submission" (leader of Church E), and not "being like a doormat" (leader of Church H).

In accordance with this finding, John Stott (1984), a British theologian, argues that the Bible use two analogies to represent the relationship of husband and wife: "Christ and church" and "head and body". Both demonstrated unity, complementary, and loving relationship. Only insane head will abuse his/her own body parts.

Churches with egalitarian perspective believe that equality is God's gift to create healthy families. Churches with traditional perspective also argue that this type of power structure is created by God to support positive family functioning. That is why they strictly oppose domestic violence.

Therefore, gender equality campaigns in Indonesian churches can start their movement by providing Biblical and empirical evidences, that equality leads to positive and healthy family functioning.

The Role of Church Leaders

The role of church leaders in creating social changes - including promoting gender equality - among Christian communities is paramount. Previous studies show the importance of religious leaders in promoting health among faith-based communities. (Allen, Davey, & Davey, 2010; Jo, Maxwell, Yang, & Bastani, 2010; Williams, Glandz, Kegler, & Davis, 2009).

Various activities are used by these churches to teach the principles regarding gender: premarital classes/counseling/seminars, regular teaching classes/sermons/small-group lessons, special classes/seminars/camps, books, and radio broadcastings. However, these activities must be supported by the leaders' beliefs in gender equality, example of the leaders own life, and willingness of the leadership team to prioritize gender awareness promotion.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Using six aspects of gender role ideology from Davis and Greenstein (2009), this study finds that the teachings regarding gender role ideology of eight churches in Surabaya is relatively egalitarian. The most traditional aspect is primacy of breadwinner, while the most egalitarian are male privilege and household utility.

Five media used to deliver teachings regarding gender role are premarital classes/counseling/seminars, regular teaching classes/sermons/small-group lessons, special classes/seminars/camps, books and radio broadcastings, and women empowerment commission.

The strongest traditional perspective is the preference of male leadership in family, spiritual, and church context. This perspective is based on the Ephesians 5:22 which explicitly use the word "the husband is the head of the wife". Most leaders agree that the essence of leadership is decision making, and the leadership style should not be authoritarian; and submit means acknowledge the leadership of the husband and cooperate in a good way.

The church leaders emphasize on the importance of avoiding leadership abuse within this power relation, such as domestic violence, by using prayer, counseling, and compliance to the law.

Future studies can explore how these teachings are internalized by congregants: whether or not they agree with the church's teachings, and to what extent their behaviors and decisions influenced by their gender-role ideology. Expanding the exploration to other religious traditions in Indonesia is also suggested, because the dynamics of gender and religion are exceptionally complex among various religious traditions.

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¹ In Indonesia, government categorizes Christian and Catholic into separate religion. While 'Catholic' refers to Roman Catholic, 'Christian' refers to all other Christian denominations