

# SHIFTING PATRIARCHAL VALUES AND STRENGTHENING EQUALITY IN INDONESIAN FAMILIES THROUGH GENDER COURSE

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**Abstract:** This article examines how a one-semester gender course shaped undergraduate students' perceptions of patriarchal values in their families. The course, a compulsory fifth-semester unit for third-year International Relations students in the Transnational Society concentration at Universitas Riau, combined gender theory with guest lectures from Indonesia, Singapore and Japan, supported by the Eurasia Foundation. Drawing on open-ended interviews, open-ended questionnaire responses and a focus group discussion held in the final phase of the course, and analysed through manual thematic analysis, the study finds that students reported a perceived shift in how they understood sex and gender, masculinity and femininity, and the division of labour at home. Mutual respect and openness were the values students found easiest to practise, while challenging inherited patriarchal norms was the hardest. A supportive classroom atmosphere and accessible materials enabled this perceived shift, while conservative social values, stigma and social pressure constrained it. The article argues that inclusive, discussion-based gender education can open space for questioning patriarchal norms, but that such perceived change, observed in a single class without a pre-course baseline, cannot be read as measured change across Indonesian families.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Gender, Family, Equality, Eurasia Foundation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is a structural problem that organises power within the smallest unit of society, the family, and through the family into the wider social order. Patriarchal norms are deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and societal systems, and they can significantly limit opportunities for gender equality (Omar Elsaltani & Foster, 2025). They manifest in how men and women differ in their access to material and non-material resources, and traditional systems often reflect practices of subordination and domination across social life (Dagdeviren & Oosterbaan, 2022). Within families, patriarchy not only regulates power relations but also

hinders women's potential in the broader social sphere (Bethencourt & Santos, 2025). This article studies that problem from one specific vantage point: the perceptions of undergraduate students about the patriarchal values in their own families, after taking an extensive gender course. The families themselves were not studied directly; what is examined here is how students perceive, question and renegotiate the values they grew up with. That scope matters, because the title's reference to Indonesian families must not be mistaken for a study of families as such. The evidence is students' accounts, gathered in one course at one university, and the claims of this article are kept within that scope throughout.

The setting is the Department of International Relations at Universitas Riau, where a gender course is compulsory for third-year undergraduates in the Transnational Society concentration. In South and Southeast Asia, more women have gained access to education, yet patriarchal values have not been sufficiently disrupted by that access alone; transformative efforts are needed beyond schooling itself (Peppin Vaughan, 2025). Education can raise awareness of more equal gender divisions, but awareness does not automatically displace norms inherited across generations (Cin & Walker, 2016). A gender course is therefore a revealing site for study: it is a deliberately inclusive learning space in which students encounter, often for the first time in a structured way, the idea that gender roles are made rather than given, and that the arrangements of their own households can be questioned. Whether that encounter produces anything more than a temporary widening of vocabulary is the empirical question of this article.

Three research questions guide the article. RQ1: How do students perceive patriarchal values in their families, and how do they report those perceptions changing after the gender course? RQ2: Which gender-equality values do students find easiest and hardest to practise in their families and communities? RQ3: What enables or hinders students in applying gender-equality values beyond the classroom? The conclusion answers each question in turn, and the recommendations are linked one by one to the findings.

### ***Analytic Lenses***

No single named framework is imposed on the material. Instead, the analysis is organised around three analytic lenses drawn from the article's own concepts: patriarchal values, gender as social construction, and the family as an institution. The first lens, patriarchal values, follows Shepherd's (2022) definition of patriarchy as a set of norms, beliefs, traditions and customs that place men at the apex of social hierarchy. Its observable indicators in this study are the division of domestic labour, decision-making authority within the household, son preference, and control over resources. The second lens, gender as social construction, follows the classic account of gender as something people do in interaction rather than something they simply have (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and the more recent argument that gender is socially constructed in the community (Lee et al., 2025). Its indicators are the distinction students draw between sex and gender, and the way masculinity and femininity are compared across cultures. The third lens, the family as an institution, follows the

understanding of family as the basic social institution in which tradition, belief and custom are preserved and gender roles are implemented (Portengen & van der Neut, 2018). Its indicators are the transmission of norms across generations and the negotiation or resistance students describe within their households. These lenses are used as the organising categories of the thematic analysis, and the findings are reported through them, rather than through a framework that is named but never applied.

The article proceeds as follows. The literature review sets out the concepts of gender and patriarchy and the place of education in changing them. The method section describes the course, the data generation and the thematic analysis, including what was not reported. The results present the participant profile and the three thematic findings. The discussion interprets those findings through the analytic lenses, and a separate limitations section states plainly what this study cannot show. The conclusion answers the three research questions and offers recommendations linked to the findings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Gender and Patriarchy Concepts*

Gender and patriarchy are intertwined concepts: to understand one, the other must be understood, because both concern norms embedded in social, economic and political settings. Patriarchy is a system that allows men to manipulate social arrangements for their own interests, so that men gain more benefits, positions and ease within society, while women are oppressed and exploited for the sake of men's domination (Singh, 2021). Many scholars describe patriarchy as male domination and as the power relationships by which men dominate women (Strid & Hearn, 2022). One of its key characteristics is male identification, in which society tends to identify and value masculinity over femininity; masculinity then stands as the standard against which all other identities are measured, whereas femininity is marginalised or devalued (Sjoberg, 2015). Hegemonic masculinity names the culturally idealised form of manhood that legitimates men's dominant position, even though most men do not fully embody it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Gender, in this account, is not a fixed property of persons but a social construction, negotiated through interaction, institutional practice and cultural discourse (Lee et al., 2025). Men have traditionally been associated with rationality, strength, independence and engagement with the public sphere, and are often privileged as leaders in the family and community and as breadwinners. Femininity, by contrast, has frequently been defined through emotionality, dependency, nurturing and domesticity, so that women's roles within the family are typically related to housework and care work, including childbearing and caring for elderly members (Jain, 2022). The distribution of women's work between income generation, expenditure-saving and unpaid domestic responsibilities is itself a product of norms that matter, in the sense that they assign domestic work to women because it is perceived as feminine, with consequences for women's status, well-being and presence in public space (Deshpande &

Kabeer, 2021). Marriage satisfaction research likewise shows how gender norms shape the division of unpaid domestic work, with men's participation in housework still treated in many settings as taboo or undignified (Chen & Hu, 2021). Women's disproportionate burden of housework and childcare persists across changing structures and roles (Elbert, 2021).

The family is where these arrangements are first learned and longest preserved. Family is the smallest unit in the community, a basic social institution in which people are bound by marriage and child-raising, and in which tradition, belief and custom are preserved and gender roles are implemented (Portengen & van der Neut, 2018). Child (2022) describes the patriarchal institution from within the family itself, showing how hierarchy gives each member a position and makes men the primary authority. Institutionalised patriarchy reaches beyond the household into career outcomes, as women's professional lives are shaped by the same norms that govern the home (Imhanrenialena et al., 2025). Gender ideology, understood as a set of social beliefs about how men and women should map out their life opportunities, is influenced by cultural norms and history, and it keeps women predominantly burdened with household chores (Hermaleni, 2021). Cultural norms and gender-discriminating practices are relative to their settings, which is why the same patriarchal structure can look different in different communities while producing similar inequalities (Abadeer, 2015).

Education is often proposed as the remedy, but the literature gives reason for caution. Reconsidering girls' education from a capabilities and feminist perspective shows that schooling can expand what girls and women are able to be and do, yet its effects depend on the wider normative setting (Cin & Walker, 2016). Women's education alone may be less effective at disrupting generational patriarchal values than transformative efforts that confront those values directly, a point made sharply in research on son preference in South and East Asia, where women's rising education has not by itself removed the prioritisation of sons over daughters (Peppin Vaughan, 2025). The broader pattern is one of uneven and stalled change: gender relations have shifted in some domains while remaining resistant in others, particularly inside the household (England, 2010). Two further threads mark the wider setting in which family patriarchy operates, even though they are not the focus of this study's data. Male out-migration can leave women with new responsibilities at home without translating that extra work into empowerment, since it is often viewed as a temporary extension of domestic obligation rather than a shift in norms (Islam et al., 2025). Gendered vulnerability also appears in food systems, where discrimination in food allocation and household ratios leaves women with less, and where interventions that ignore underlying patriarchal systems yield only limited improvements in equity (Lentz et al., 2025). Patriarchy intersects with disability as well: women and girls with disabilities face increased exposure to discrimination and abuse through the combined effects of gendered power imbalance and stigma (Yaiche et al., 2025). The threads most directly engaged by this study's findings are

those on family transmission, the domestic division of labour and education; the remaining threads are retained here as context, not as findings.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative design, chosen because its aim is to understand how students perceive and describe change in their own thinking, rather than to measure change numerically. The setting is the compulsory gender course for third-year undergraduates in the Transnational Society concentration of the International Relations programme at Universitas Riau. Three concentrations are available in the programme: International Political Economy, Diplomacy, and Transnational Society. The gender course is a prerequisite for students enrolled in the Transnational Society concentration and is offered in the fifth semester. In 2025 the course was enriched with external guest lectures and practitioners from Indonesia, Singapore and Japan, following a partnership supported by the Eurasia Foundation. Sixteen meetings were scheduled on the syllabus, from February 4, 2025 to June 28, 2025. The syllabus covered the theoretical frameworks of gender discourse in international relations, the analysis of gender issues, and critical examination of how gender inequality exists in Asian societies, with topics ranging from an introduction to feminism in Asian contexts, patriarchal values, and gender in the economy and politics, to migration issues.

Data were generated in three ways. First, open-ended interviews were conducted directly with students, using an interview guide built from open-ended questions. Second, an online form containing open-ended questions was distributed to students. Third, a focus group discussion was held with students in the final phase of the gender course, lasting about 90 minutes and led by two course lecturers. No absolute headcount is stated for the study as a whole, because the study's own reporting of participant totals is inconsistent, as noted in the limitations section. Recruitment criteria, the number of interviews conducted outside the focus group, and the number of questionnaire responses were not reported in the study, and they are not reconstructed here.

Analysis followed manual thematic analysis in the sense described by Braun and Clarke (2006): transcripts of discussions and interviews were read and re-read, patterns in keywords and key sentences were noted, and themes were confirmed through discussion within the research team. That team discussion is reported honestly as peer discussion; it is not triangulation across sources or methods, and it is not described as such. The themes that organise the results are the three analytic lenses set out in the introduction, applied to three substantive topics: perceived shifts in understanding, the values students found easiest and hardest to practise, and the enablers of and barriers to value change. On ethics, consents were confirmed before data generation and ethical standards were stated to be guaranteed. No ethics approval number and no anonymisation procedure was reported, and neither is supplied here.

One design limit shapes everything that follows and is stated here as well as in the limitations section: there was no measurement of students' views before the course began. All evidence of change is therefore retrospective and perceived, gathered after a full semester of teaching. The results below report what students said had changed in their thinking; they do not demonstrate measured change, and they are worded accordingly.

## RESULTS

### *Participant Profile*

Participants were third-year undergraduates in the Transnational Society concentration, aged around 20 to 22 years, an age range described in the study as typical for third-year students and associated with developing social identities and more robust critical thinking. Women formed the large majority of participants, and the study notes that most of the experiences shared in discussions and interviews came from women who had directly experienced inequality within their families. Table 1 reports the gender distribution as percentages.

Table 1. Gender distribution of participants, as reported (percentages).

| Group | Share as reported |
|-------|-------------------|
| Women | 86.3%             |
| Men   | 13.7%             |

Note: Percentages are as reported in the study. Absolute counts are not reproduced, because the study's reported participant totals are inconsistent; see Limitations. Participants came from Malay, Minangkabau, Javanese, Batak and other backgrounds in Riau. Ethnic counts are not reproduced, because the reported ethnic figures do not reconcile; the discussion of ethnicity below therefore stays at the level of the traditions students described, without numerical claims and without ranking any group as the minority.

Ethnic background mattered to how students talked about patriarchy, even though it cannot be quantified from this study. Students described patriarchal culture in Batak families as tending to position men as clan heirs and primary decision-makers, while in matrilineal Minangkabau society women hold a stronger position in the lineage but still face limitations in their public roles. Across these different traditions, students observed the same underlying pattern: patriarchal values inherited within families shaping the way they viewed gender issues. That qualitative observation, that different kinship arrangements still transmit male authority, is the finding; no numerical comparison between ethnic groups is made.

### *Perceived Shifts in Understanding*

The clearest reported shift concerned the distinction between sex and gender. At the start of the course, several students treated the two concepts as similar in meaning and had difficulty separating them. After a semester of teaching, students reported that they could distinguish

the concepts and compare masculinity and femininity across cultures and societies. One student put the change in these terms:

“After taking an international class on gender, my understanding has truly expanded. It feels like many new doors have been opened. Previously, I only knew that gender was different from sex and that it was merely a social construct. But now, I understand more deeply that the concept of gender is dynamic. What is considered masculine or feminine in one culture can be very different from another or even change over time within the same culture. This class taught me that gender is continuously shaped by social interactions, history, and power.”

Students also reported a widening of what gender covers. Where gender had previously meant, for many of them, only the roles of men and women, it came to include stereotypes and the question of how society should function without preserving patriarchal values that disfavour women. One student summarised this as a realisation that gender is not only about stereotypes of women and men, but about how the world should function without being so fixated on existing stereotypes, and that men as well as women are part of that question. Students reported that they could see more critically why gender issues matter, particularly within their family settings, and that they had developed a sense of the risks produced by unequal relationships under patriarchy. All of these are reported perceptions, gathered retrospectively after the course; they are not before-and-after measurements, and they are not presented as such.

### ***Easiest and Hardest Values to Practise***

When students were asked what change they could most easily make after the course, and what change they found hardest within their families and communities, a consistent pattern emerged. The easiest implications were those that could be practised in everyday interaction: broadening their understanding of patriarchy as a foundation for discussing policy and regulation, and above all mutual respect. Respecting others, especially women, by not being judgemental and by respecting each other's values, was the majority response. Some students also mentioned expanded acknowledgement and respect for vulnerable groups, including gender minorities and people from underrepresented backgrounds and ethnicities. One student stated:

“The easiest value for me to implement is mutual respect and listening to others' experiences without judgment, especially those from gender minority backgrounds or underrepresented groups.”

Another student paired the easiest and the hardest values in a single reflection: open-mindedness and not discriminating against any gender, so as not to judge others carelessly, set against the difficulty of changing misconceptions, for example the idea that women must work in the domestic sector and that housework belongs only to women, when men can do it too. That difficulty, students said, comes from societal perceptions held for generations,

especially in Indonesia. The most difficult value of all was the transformation of patriarchal social norms inherited in society. Students attributed this to the complexity of cultures, traditions, beliefs and customs, and said that changing them would require time, patience and collective action between generations. One student expressed the core difficulty directly:

“The most difficult value is having the courage to challenge social norms that are considered normal by society. For example, questioning traditional gender roles in the family or community is often considered disrespectful or against tradition.”

Efforts to change traditional norms are therefore often experienced as disrespectful or against tradition, even when their purpose is to improve women’s quality of life. That social cost of questioning is itself part of what patriarchy enforces: male domination is maintained not only by rules but by the stigma attached to breaking them, so that women face burdens and disproportionate disadvantage in daily life.

### ***Enablers and Barriers***

Students identified several enablers of the perceived shift. The supportive classroom atmosphere, accessible materials and inspiring presenters were named most often, together with interaction with participants from diverse backgrounds and the support of an open academic environment. One student summarised both sides of the experience: the main enablers were the supportive classroom atmosphere, strong material and inspiring presenters, and interaction with participants from diverse backgrounds, while barriers included still-strong conservative values in society, the view that gender issues are only relevant to women, and social pressure and stigma that hindered the courage to implement change more broadly.

The most reported barriers were existing conservative social norms, pressures from circumstances, and personal resistance to change. Several students reported that they had previously thought gender was only relevant to women’s issues and not necessarily important to men, and that this false understanding had shifted during the course, although stigma and social pressure still hindered them from fully implementing changes within their families and communities. The pattern is therefore mixed: the classroom succeeded in opening perspectives, while the social environment outside it continued to penalise acting on those perspectives.

## **DISCUSSION**

Read through the three analytic lenses, the findings describe a genuine but bounded form of change. Through the lens of gender as social construction, students moved from treating gender as a synonym for sex to treating it as something done in interaction, shaped by history and power (West & Zimmerman, 1987). That is a real conceptual shift, and it matters because it makes patriarchal arrangements visible as arrangements rather than as nature. Through the lens of masculinity as a standard, students began to question the ideal that men are the

central and powerful subjects of society (Sjoberg, 2015) and the hegemonic form of manhood that legitimates men's dominant position (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Yet the findings also show the limits of that questioning: students could name the standard more readily than they could defy it at home, where challenging a norm is experienced as disrespect. That gap between recognising a norm and being able to break it is exactly what the literature on uneven and stalled gender change would predict (England, 2010).

Through the lens of the family as an institution, the findings confirm the household as the place where patriarchal values are both preserved and, potentially, renegotiated (Portengen & van der Neut, 2018). Students' accounts of domestic labour, decision-making and the expectation that housework belongs to women match the documented distribution of unpaid domestic responsibilities to women on the basis of perceived femininity (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2021) and the finding that men's participation in domestic chores is still treated as taboo or undignified in many settings (Chen & Hu, 2021). The persistence of women's disproportionate burden of housework and childcare across changing structures (Elbert, 2021) helps explain why students found mutual respect easy to practise but structural change hard: respect can be offered by individuals, while the division of labour is enforced by the household as an institution. Child's (2022) account of the patriarchal institution as described from within the family captures the same dynamic, in which each member has a position and men hold primary authority. Masculinity in this setting operates through control and domination, the values students described when they spoke of security, status and respect being maintained by pressure on women (Zhang, 2022). Gender ideology, as a set of social beliefs about how men and women should map out their lives, keeps women predominantly burdened with household chores even when formal attitudes soften (Hermaleni, 2021).

The education thread of the literature is the one this study speaks to most directly, and it counsels against overclaiming. Girls' and women's education, viewed through capabilities, can expand what women are able to be and do (Cin & Walker, 2016), and the students' reports of broadened understanding are consistent with that. But education alone has proved a weak solvent of generational patriarchal values where it is not accompanied by transformative efforts that confront those values directly (Peppin Vaughan, 2025). Institutionalised patriarchy also reaches into professional life, so that classroom change does not automatically convert into changed outcomes outside it (Imhanrenialena et al., 2025). The wider contextual threads reviewed earlier, male out-migration, food systems and disability, are not findings of this study and are not claimed as such; they are retained only to mark that family patriarchy operates within larger systems of inequality, not in isolation. What this study adds is a close account of one mechanism, the classroom as a space where perceptions can shift, and one constraint, the social cost of carrying that shift into the family.

Two cautions follow for how this study should be read. First, its evidence is retrospective self-report from a single class, gathered by the course's own lecturers, in a cohort that was predominantly female. Its findings describe what students said had changed, not what an

independent observer measured. Second, its scope is students' perceptions of their families, not families themselves. Any reading that extends these findings to Indonesian families in general, or to Asian societies in general, would exceed the evidence, and this article does not make that extension.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study has several limitations that bound its conclusions. First, there was no pre-course baseline measurement. All evidence of change is retrospective and perceived, so the study cannot demonstrate that the course caused change, nor how much change occurred. Second, the focus group discussion was led by two course lecturers. That facilitator role creates a risk of social desirability bias, in which students report the views they believe their lecturers expect, and this risk is not controlled for in the design. Third, women formed the large majority of participants, at 86.3% as reported, so the perspectives gathered are predominantly women's, including women who had directly experienced inequality in their families; men's perspectives are thinly represented. Fourth, the study covers a single class at a single university, so its findings cannot be generalised to Indonesian families or to Asian societies. Fifth, the study's reported participant totals are inconsistent, and its reported ethnic figures do not reconcile; for that reason this article states no absolute headcount and reproduces no ethnic counts. Sixth, no ethics approval number and no anonymisation procedure was reported, and no coding protocol or coder agreement was reported for the thematic analysis, so the analytic trail cannot be independently checked. Seventh, families themselves were not studied directly; the study examines students' perceptions of their families, and conclusions about family change would require family-level evidence.

## **CONCLUSION**

RQ1 asked how students perceive patriarchal values in their families, and how they report those perceptions changing after the gender course. Students reported that they came to distinguish sex from gender, to compare masculinity and femininity across cultures, and to see gender as dynamic, shaped by social interaction, history and power. They reported that this broadened understanding made patriarchal arrangements in their families newly visible to them, particularly the division of domestic labour and the expectation that women carry it. That is a perceived and retrospective change, not a measured one, and it is claimed only in those terms.

RQ2 asked which gender-equality values students found easiest and hardest to practise. The easiest were mutual respect, listening without judgement, openness and non-discrimination, including respect for gender minorities and underrepresented groups. The hardest was challenging inherited patriarchal norms themselves: questioning traditional gender roles in the family or community, and changing misconceptions such as the idea that housework

belongs only to women, because such questioning is experienced as disrespectful or against tradition and requires time, patience and collective action across generations.

RQ3 asked what enables or hinders students in applying gender-equality values beyond the classroom. Enablers were a supportive classroom atmosphere, accessible materials, inspiring presenters, interaction with participants from diverse backgrounds, and an open academic environment. Barriers were conservative social values, stigma and social pressure, personal resistance to change, and the prior belief, itself shifted during the course, that gender issues concern women only.

Four recommendations follow, each linked to a finding. First, for course design: retain discussion-based, inclusive formats with accessible materials and diverse guest perspectives, since those were the enablers students actually named. Second, for learning beyond the classroom: create dialogue spaces, including spaces that involve men, where questioning norms carries less stigma, since stigma was the barrier students most often reported. Third, for the institution: treat gender education as a sustained programme rather than a single-semester exposure, since students themselves said that changing inherited norms requires time and collective action. Fourth, for future research: adopt a pre-course and post-course design with independent facilitation, a more balanced sample, direct family-level inquiry, and a reported ethics approval and coding protocol, so that change can be measured rather than only perceived. The international gender class programme at Universitas Riau shows that inclusive learning spaces can open students' thinking about patriarchy; whether that opening becomes change in families depends on what happens after students leave the classroom, and that question remains open.

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