



IR-UI COMMENTARIES

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Indonesia's Perilous Passage of Gender Equality Fulfilment: Some Reflections on the Limits of Human Security

Authors: Annisa D. Amalia¹, Ani W. Soetjipto², Andi Yentriyani³

Summary⁴

While gender equality has been widely acknowledged as a key indicator for development, Indonesia has continued to see unsolved crisis concerning women. The concept of human security which posits human beings at the centre of the policy response is apparently inadequate. However, more than merely reconceptualizing the concept and substantively translating them into political actions, there is an urgency for meticulously rethinking the all-encompassing structure within which human security is executed.

Keywords: *cultural relativism, gender, patriarchy, sustainable human development*

¹ Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia

² Senior Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia

³ Commissioner, Komnas Perempuan (Indonesia National Commission on Violence against Women)

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Human Security and Gender

First introduced in the [United Nations Development Programmes' 1994 Human Development Report](#), the term human security was essentially adopted within the paradigm of sustainable human development, and aimed to address challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of people. The people-centred approach of human security agenda was formulated to challenge the domination of traditional security studies and policies, attempting to re-shift the referent object from state to human, and from military-focused to diverse sources of threats (including environmental, economic, and political insecurities). Security, thus, in this case, is not conventionally understood; rather, it is at an intersection of cross-cutting issues of development and human rights agendas.

Since the concept of human security places individuals as the referent object, gender dimension inherently part of the agenda. However, while the concepts of human security and gender are intertwined, it is strategically more relevant to discuss gender perspective within the human security agenda—not the other way around, since gender relations have evolved into an underlying structure with potentials of shaping political agendas, including human security—a point we will further elaborate as this discussion proceeds.

How Sufficient are Indonesian Existing Gender-relevant Policies?

With the existence of *Komnas Perempuan* (Indonesia National Commission on Violence against Women) and other women organizations in the country, Indonesia has adopted a number of policies regarding gender equality. It has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in which the concept of human security and gender are closely linked. Nevertheless, the data demonstrates that the implementation is far from satisfactory. There have been some cases where gender inequality is manifested as insecurity for many women. *Komnas Perempuan* has released a [survey report](#) emphasizing that when women are economically marginalized, they are relatively more exposed to a range of insecurities, for instance economic-based exploitation and violence, due to lower bargaining position. Related to this finding, other challenges encountered by women, such as [gender pay gap](#), [rate of violence against women](#), [conflicts over land rights](#), and [infectious diseases](#) have put women in a more vulnerable situation than men.

Many of these problems are rooted in the failure of government to develop and implement CEDAW guidelines based on the principle of [due diligence](#). However, they are also owed to the inability and negligence of government to accurately interpret the concept of human security based on the gender perspective. Although gender has been mainstreamed as a key term in almost all political agendas, including in security and development policies (Sustainable Development Goals, for example, perceives gender as a central aspect of development), it mostly works as a mere technocratic term. Gender issues work in a scale whereby they matter most when they concern condition of women in 'less' important arena, such as women's participation in education and politics, but matter less in 'high politics' agendas, such as state security and economy. [Counter-terrorism strategy, for example, is highly gendered since women are regarded as passive and innocent actors without direct contribution to violence,](#)

while the [policy of healthcare and education privatisation](#) have failed to consider its greater impacts on women. Indonesian government's attempt to involve more women in policy dialogues should be welcomed, but two pertinent questions linger: do all women involved possess appropriate understanding on gender-related concerns (such as gender bias and gender imbalanced power relations) and if yes, how to ensure their voices are not only heard, but most importantly substantively accommodated and translated into actions? To address those challenges, we are in dire need of reconceptualizing the concept of gender mainstreaming which currently operates under a structure heavily dominated by the logic of patriarchy—where gender analysis and women-related issues are still considered 'low' and less critical, not deserving strategic attention.

Questioning the Cultural Relativism

The patriarchal logic that very much influences our perspective about gender is not only ingrained in Indonesian political system, but also in our culture. Here, the journey of achieving gender equality is most certainly situated in the wider discourse of morality. Feminism and its views are regarded contradictory to the 'Eastern' and religion-influenced culture of Indonesia which is perceived as situating women under men's influence, creates clear boundaries between public and private spheres and perceives gender-related topics as offensive. Thus, it is not particularly surprising that while gender equality indicators have not yet been accomplished, we continue to observe the trend of cultural backlash: domestication of women, child marriage, sexual violence against women, and other gender-based abusive practices considered 'normal'. Recently, *Komnas Perempuan* has also received an [increased domestic violence reports](#) triggered by toxic masculinity—despite the assumption that domestic sphere is 'safer' for women. This widespread rejection to deliver equal status and rights to women is justified in the name of 'culture'.

This perspective seems to be inherent in many Indonesian cultures; to make things more undesirable this perspective seems to be not only sustained by state policies and education system but is also continuously reproduced through public discourses. There have been efforts to challenge dominant discourses, especially among younger generations,. However, it seems that we will expect a long rough road to address gender issues in terms of the complex problem of gendered power relations. It is not an unexpected news that while we have stepped on condition where women's employment increases, women's domestic burden multiplies—especially during this Covid-19 pandemic where women actually have a greater chance to share burden more equitably with men. That said, more women in state, academic, and non-governmental institutions might be futile if they are not well-equipped by a comprehensive understanding of gender and political will to diminish factors contributing to the inequality itself.

Technology as a Double-Edged Sword

In the midst of disappointment, global technological development presents an opportunity to advance gender equality agenda. On one hand, technology facilitates more intensive communication and access for women during crisis. It functions as reporting mechanism, dialogue forum, tool for public campaign, as well as tool for collaboration with international society. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, women are increasingly exposed to various assistive features of technology. On the other hand, technology also facilitates new forms of [online gender-based violence](#) and exploitation of women in various job industries. Online violence includes revenge porn, malicious distribution, cyber harassment/bullying, spamming, impersonation, cyber stalking, recruitment, sexting and cyber hacking, where women often experience re-victimisation and criminalisation. While during pandemic, *Komnas Perempuan* has called for a greater public attention and stakeholders' intervention to address the [increased exploitation of female workers](#) due to multiplied workloads in order to cover economic loss. Thus, even opportunities to turn the condition around is vast, repercussions will still occur if the system allowing such exploitative practices is not addressed.

Theory-Practice Nexus: Finding a Common Ground

Academia presents another layer of opportunity to achieve gender equality, noting that both existing gender-relevant policies and discourses are heavily influenced by the contribution of feminist scholars. Their critiques of patriarchal system and unequal gendered power relations have provided us with lenses to see the 'reality' from different perspectives. However, pertinent to this academic progress is the adoption of feminist perspective in other studies. While gender studies are quite advanced in deconstructing longstanding gendered assumptions, other studies have not equally enthusiastic in critically responding to and engaging feminist thoughts in scholarly conversations. Although the concept of human security was purposed to refute the dominant masculine approach in security studies, it still operates with a masculinist logic—where women's experience, patriarchal nature, public/private division, and power relations are not taken into account—due to inadequate comprehension and integration of gender perspective.

The critical dialogue among academic communities is one issue to be addressed, but theory-practice link is another vital problem. The translation of gender concept in a technocratic and bureaucratic sense, including in the SDGs, for instance, is insufficient to capture and address the whole issue of gender inequality. Currently, our gender-relevant policies open spaces for negotiation, where gender is continuously a subject to debate and interpretation—putting it in jeopardy. Therefore, more intensive dialogue among scholars and practitioners is urgently required, where both parties work to synchronize each other's perspectives, formulate policies which accurately convey gender equality ideas and ensure their substantive implementation.

Unlearning Patriarchy, Unlearning Our Gendered Values

With the aforementioned discussion, one overarching question we all need to answer is how will we address such a multifaceted challenge? As we closely revisited it, the core problem lies on the persistence of patriarchy. This structure is deeply ingrained in our culture that it dictates, consciously or not, how our bureaucrats formulate and implement public policies, how our society perceives gender relations, how the perceived opportunity such as technology facilitates and sustains gendered and exploitative practices, and how our scholars produce knowledge and develop dialogues with practitioners. It is only realistic to say that, it is highly unlikely to achieve gender equality within the context of human security agenda without first dismantling the prevailing structure. It is certainly a challenging work that requires a fundamental shift in our mindset; but to be gradually cognizant and critical of the structure is a key beginning.***

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Dwi Ardhanariswari, Ph.D. (riris.sundrijo@ui.ac.id)

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Department of International Relations

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences Universitas Indonesia

☎ (+62 21)-7873-744 ✉ internationalrelations@ui.ac.id

🌐 www.ir.fisip.ui.ac.id 📷 @internationalrelationsui

🐦 @ir_fisipui

