

“Midwife/Nurse-Uniformed Man” Romance Trend: The Internalization of Patriarchal Values and the Relevance of Post-New Order State *Ibuism*

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the Indonesian public discourse has been stirred up by the stereotypes of midwives and nurses who are obsessed with having romantic relationships with army personnel or police officers (collectively known as “uniformed men”). Pre-wedding photographs of midwife/nurse-uniformed man couples are often ridiculed by Internet users, and discussions about the stereotypes have become sources of debate on social media. Considering that midwives, nurses, army personnel, and police officers are all gendered occupations, this raises questions about the possible gender roots behind the phenomenon and its meaning on the reality of women's existence in Indonesia. This paper aims to investigate the effect of these stereotypes on the prevalence of patriarchal values in Indonesian society. By dissecting the basic ideas behind the common stereotypes associated with midwives/nurses and army personnel/police officers, this study finds that the romance trend between midwives/nurses and the “uniformed men” is a reflection of the greater issue of gender power imbalance, namely state *ibuism*. Even though state *ibuism* is a legacy of the New Order, it remains a symbol of the reality where gender is a means of objectification, construction, and suppression of women's identity to preserve patriarchy in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Feminism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender Stereotypes, Midwife/Nurse-Uniformed Man Romance Trend*

1. INTRODUCTION

Stereotypes of midwives or nurses who are infatuated with members of the armed forces (“*pria berseragam*”, lit. “men in uniform”), such as TNI personnel and POLRI officers, have become controversial subjects in Indonesian public and social media discourse. In turn, the stereotypes attached to the professions of midwives/nurses and military/police officers have become sources of debate on social media, and pre-wedding photos of couples in these two professions are often made fun by internet users. One of the pre-wedding photos commonly circulated on the internet shows an army officer pointing a gun at a woman dressed in nurse uniform, whereas the woman is seen covering the mouth of the gun with a stethoscope; this photo has now become the standard reference for the studio shots of other couples alike. There are also jokes about how many midwives and nurses wish to have wedding ceremonies where they are saluted by sabers or swords (*saber arch*, “*pedang pora*” in

Indonesian)—a tradition synonymous to a “wedding goal” for them.

The popularity of the romance trend between midwives/nurses and men in uniform raises questions whether this phenomenon has gender aspects behind it, and whether this phenomenon reflects the realities of life for women in Indonesia. In answering these two questions, this paper focuses on elaborating on the popular stereotypes associated with midwives/nurses and military/police officers as well as relating these stereotypes to the imbalance of power relations between genders in Indonesia. Since the midwife/nurse-uniformed man romance can be categorized as a recent phenomenon, there are very few scientific writings or articles that have thoroughly discussed this issue. Therefore, this paper is hoped to be able to contribute to the existing literature on feminism in Indonesia by presenting an analysis that transcends the boundaries of ideology and idealism, namely an analysis that takes historical aspects into account. The findings in this paper are divided into two subsections: the first subsection explains how the stereotypes regarding

midwives/nurses and army/police personnel and the associations they create have a significant effect on how patriarchal thinking is deep-rooted in Indonesian society, and the second subsection evaluates the relationship between the midwife/nurse-uniformed man romance trend and state *ibuism* as a gender ideology.

In examining the romance trend and the occupational stereotypes surrounding it, state *ibuism* will be used as a tool of analysis. First coined by Julia Suryakusuma, state *ibuism* is a concept that describes the role of the state in constructing and redefining womanhood. In the context of authoritarianism, the state aims to control its people in such a way that they are willing to support the regime’s goals [1]. Indonesia’s New Order, otherwise known as an ‘authoritarian developmentalist’ regime, was a regime that had economic development as its top priority. Political dynamics are considered a threat to national stability—a necessary condition for achieving this development [1]. Comprising half of the country’s total population, Indonesian women—including poor women—are deprived of their political role and significance; they were then instructed and mobilized to support the development goals of the New Order through a series of highly interventionist state institutions and policies.

Gender was the most important aspect in the New Order kinship principle and patriarchal authority exercised by the state [2]. Soeharto was described as the “father” and a “natural” leader of the country, and this became the core of the hierarchy replicated in the two blocks of nation-building: public services and the nuclear family. The “organic” aspect of this hierarchy is based on “natural destiny” (*kodrat*)—biological characteristics according to the laws of nature—which places men as the ‘head of the family’ or ‘the proper leader’, while women are regarded as ‘wives’ or ‘mothers’. State *ibuism* perpetuates how maternal characteristics form the basis of women’s political status and their incorporation into the political order [2]. Based on the ideals of the Javanese aristocracy (*priyayi*) *ibuism*, women are defined in the following order: (1) as appendages and loyal partners for their husbands, (2) as procreators of the nation’s future generation, (3) as mothers and teachers for their children, (4) as housekeepers, and (5) as members of Indonesian society [3].

2. METHOD

This paper is the result of qualitative research using secondary data in the form of popular stereotypes commonly associated with the professions of midwife/nurse and armed forces (army and police) personnel. First, stereotypes of midwives/nurses and men in uniform as they appear in public discussion and mass media are analyzed and their prevalence traced; this is done to determine the extent to which patriarchal values are internalized and rooted in Indonesian society. Then, the relationship between midwife/nurse-uniformed man romance trend and the concept of state *ibuism* as a continuing legacy of the New Order in Indonesia today is further examined.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Midwife/Nurse-Uniformed Man Stereotypes: Reflections of a Patriarchal Society

Stereotypes about the majority of midwives who prefer dating or marrying men in uniform—both TNI soldiers and Polri officers—circulate regularly on social media, with hashtags such as #bidantentara (#midwifesoldier) or #bidanpolisi (#midwife police) populated with photos like the following [4, Fig. 1]:



Figure 1 A photo collage of midwife/nurse-uniformed man pre-wedding studio portraits

Also, Hastanto [4] summarizes some of the common reasons many midwives want or choose to pursue romantic relationships with army or police personnel:

“[Soldiers or police officers have] manly posture, plus their uniforms can make me melt.”

“I’m a person who typically likes long-distance relationships. We will just fight if we meet too frequently.”

“They are willing to serve their country, surely they are willing to serve their families as well.”

“So, the wives of abdi negara (lit. state servants) belong to their organization. Being a member is very beneficial instead of just staying home and taking care of the kids.”

As shown in these four reasons, there are several indicators of how the identity of 'army/police personnel' is constructed. On reason (1), soldiers and police officers are described as having “manly posture” and wearing “uniforms that can melt [the eyes]”. Manly posture is one way of portraying the image of 'the knight' as a major symbol of masculinity [5]. Meanwhile, the uniform that signifies the identity of army soldiers and police personnel is a symbol of “service as an expression of full masculinity” [6]. Reason (2) does not have an explicit identity marker connected to the army or the police, but there is an implication that soldiers and police officers are “individuals who are willing to be away from loved ones for the sake of defending the country”. The same sentiment is also expressed by reason (3), where “responsibility to the state” is glorified as a symbol of “loyalty”. Reason (2) and reason (3) share one common theme: nationalism. Military cultural values such as dedication to defending the country, subordinating the need for individuals to serve the collective, and following the chain of command emphasize a warrior mentality, and soldiers and police who succeed in realizing these values are considered ‘manly’, ‘tough’, and ‘being a true man’ [7].

According to Belkin [8, p. 3], the qualities of ‘army/police personnel’ as reflected by reasons (1), (2), and (3) are representations of military masculinity: “a set of beliefs, practices, and attributes that can enable individuals to claim supremacy based on affiliation with the military or with military ideas”; Belkin [8] then explained that a person’s masculinity is strengthened if the person had links with military institutions. The armed forces and the police have a major influence on the perpetuation of patriarchy by constructing what is called hegemonic masculinity: the “highest” form of masculinity and reflects domination over women and masculinities that are considered to be lower [9]. Reason (4) is different from the previous three reasons, in which the image of army or police personnel is formed from how being a soldier or police’s wife provides many benefits. Here, the identity of ‘midwife/nurse’ is built as an extension of the identity of ‘army/police personnel’. The ‘midwife/nurse’ identity cannot stand by its own characteristics and qualities, but must rely on its relationship as the antithesis of ‘army/police personnel’. Furthermore, the statement “just

staying home and taking care of the kids” also underestimates domestic responsibilities whose burdens fall on women disproportionately, and this creates the impression that the unfair division of labor at home is understood as something normal [10]. Therefore, reason (4) can be said to be a form of internalization of the identity and roles of women—represented by ‘midwives/nurses’—under male supremacy—represented by ‘army/police personnel’.

The prominent representations of masculinity surrounding army soldiers and police officers and the subsequent lack of female identities other than the soldiers or officers’ romantic partners/wives as evidenced from these stereotypes show that patriarchal values, manifesting itself in the ideology of state *ibuism*, is still widespread in today's Indonesian society. The imageries these stereotypes evoke generally put forth a heavy, idealized focus on the role of army soldiers and police officers as father figures, embodying masculine virtues such as 'manly', 'loyal', 'dedicated', and 'dutiful'. Societal and political dominance in Indonesia is based on the imagination of a patriarchal family, and they rest upon the “natural authority” of the father. However, the father is not complete without the mother; this image is not complete without women—as represented by nurses and midwives in this case—playing their prescribed roles as the gendered other.

To justify the subordination of women required to sustain this image, these stereotypes frame the idea that being romantically involved with or married to army/police personnel is a perfect “goal” that everyone should seek to achieve. Moreover, the patriarchal society has long perceived nursing and midwifery as predominantly “feminine” occupations due to 'caring' and 'nurturing' being seen as motherly traits. As nurses and midwives are occupations extended from a mother's domestic roles, they become the direct antithesis of army soldiers and police officers. In other words, these gendered professions are the perfect representations of Indonesia's “family roles”: army soldiers/police officers are the “fathers” and nurses/midwives are the “mothers”.

3.2. What Now? State *Ibuism* in Indonesia Today

From the stereotypes above, it is clear that the romance trend between midwives/nurses and men in uniform is only one small facet of a larger issue: state *ibuism* in Indonesian society is still ongoing. The masculinist ideals as constructed in the identity of 'army/police personnel' is continuously emphasized in public discourse, so that the identity of the

'midwife/nurse' is dwarfed to become a mere 'soldier/police officer wives'. Gender is still the driving force to make women as socially constructed objects to achieve certain hierarchical or patriarchal orders. However, what has changed from the current state *ibuism* is the role of the state. The shift in the constellation of power and democratization as a result of the Reformation means that the state no longer has a monopoly on the public life of its people. This means that the construction of womanhood is no longer fully controlled by the state, but is open to various interpretations [11]. However, in the case of midwife/nurse-uniformed man romance trend, the opportunities to redefine womanhood seem to have small-scale significance; as present-day manifestations of the deeply rooted ideology and culture of state paternalism, the stereotypes regarding both the romance trend and the professions have been met with little to no resistance or deconstruction attempts.

The fundamental difference between manifestations of state *ibuism* during the New Order era and in the post-New Order period can be explained in triangles below [Fig. 2].

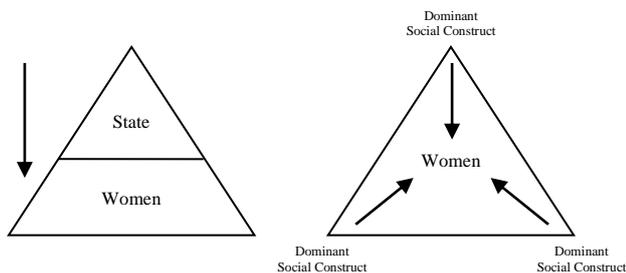


Figure 2 Two triangles illustrating the various factors that shape Indonesian women's identity and roles in the New Order era (left) and the post-New Order era (right) respectively

Whereas during the New Order era the triangle took the form of a stratified hierarchy and women were at the lowest level, the post-New Order period changed the shape of the triangle into an equilateral triangle with women in the middle of it [11]. The three angles represent dominant social constructions, and this new triangle indicates that women's identity and roles in society are being influenced by these three angles. Because democracy and decentralization as a result of the Reformation help solidify the distribution of power between political actors, this means that today's Indonesian women face marginalization and discrimination from all sides.

At present, Islam as the majority religion in Indonesia has become another significant influence in the survival of state *ibuism* in the post-New Order era [12], [13], [14]. According to Brenner [12], democratization has led to the search for a moral foundation for the majority of society, which allows the emergence of liberal Islam and conservative Islam. Women's identities are again at the stake for the battle between these two moral compasses. Not only that, but claims for regional autonomy are also often based on a certain cultural identity, and this results in expectations or even compulsion for women to adopt conservative roles and behavior models. Wieringa [14] explains that the rise of neo-Salafism and conservative values (which are disguised as "traditions") revives once again the concept of kodrat. The state, according to Wieringa [14], has taken part in this revival by promoting the concept of "keluarga sakinah" (harmonious family) which is based on heteronormativity and gender harmony. Just as it was in the New Order era, men and women perform different roles according to their "nature", which "naturally" limit women's power and agency to the confines of the domestic home. The image of the 'obedient and loyal housewife' in the New Order era will experience a resurgence, but this new version comes with a twist: women are expected to be not only obedient but also pious.

4. CONCLUSION

The romance trend between midwives/nurses and army/police officers is a proof of how contemporary Indonesian society prioritizes and celebrates male authority in its reinforcement of patriarchal family stereotypes, with the army/police officers as the "father" and the midwives/nurses as the "mother". Although state *ibuism* is a considered to be a legacy from a bygone era, gender as a weapon to justify the continuation of patriarchy is still visible in Indonesia even to this day, and it is likely that a new manifestation of state *ibuism*—influenced by Islam—will pave the way for new constructions of women's identity: Islamist state *ibuism*.

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