



# The Story of Old Women and Autonomy: A Feminist Study of the Obstacles on Old Women's Autonomy in Old Age

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**Abstract.** Old women are constrained by unequal power relations to have a prosperous and comfortable life. The unequal power relations affect access, power, and control of old women. In this case, the autonomy of old women to determine the decision on their life choices is hampered. In addition, old women are more vulnerable to gender-based injustice because they have two identities as a woman and an old person. This study examines autonomy of old women in DKI Jakarta, Indonesia by applying existentialism theory of Simone de Beauvoir and relational autonomy of Natalie Stoljar. Data are obtained by using a qualitative approach with feminist perspective. Findings of this study show that old women must face various factors that impeded their autonomy, including power relations, doctrines of patriarchal values, and oppressive relationships in their old life. These inhibiting factors affect old women during their old life. However, old women can have autonomy because old women can do self-reflection on the oppressive conditions they experienced and to produce knowledge to strategically deal with oppression in themselves.

**Keywords:** Old Women · Autonomy · Obstacles · Feminist Studies

## 1 Introduction

Old women are more less active group compared to old men in their old age [1]. Domestic works, family, cultural restrictions, income disparity, education, lack of social support, and low self-confidence of old women inhibit old women to be as active as old men. The influence of patriarchal culture puts women as inferior ones and lower self-confidence than men; brings more domestic burdens to old women [2]. The patriarchal factors cause old women more less active than old men in their old age. Moreover, it also indicates that old women are in a discriminatory and oppressive society. This situation is a form of gender-based injustice to old women. Inferiority experienced by old women shows that there are problems related to autonomy. The study of autonomy issue is important as an effort to provide solutions of injustice in old women.

In patriarchal society, the position of women is perceived below men [3]. Women are put in subordinate, marginal and inferior positions. This explains that there are unequal power relations experienced by women [4]. The unequal power relations also affect women's autonomy in decisions regarding their lives. Autonomy owned by women can be hampered by oppressive environments and relationships around them. These obstacles occur because oppressive environments and relationships can influence the mindset, perspective, behaviour, norm, and value adopted by women [5].

Through a study of the autonomy of old women, we can see how patriarchal culture causes discrimination and oppression of women even at their old age [6]. In addition, we can see how the patriarchal values that cause discrimination, the unequal power and oppression relations for old women impeded old women to choose their own decisions and become autonomous.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is an important work of national development in Indonesia. One indicator that must be achieved to succeed the national development based on the SDGs is the elimination inequalities. All Indonesian become subjects and objects in the national development based on SDGs including old women. Moreover, it was predicted that the number of old women in Indonesia will increase [7], so it is very important to produce a solution to the problem of inequalities that occurs in old women as a contribution to the success of national development.

Based on the explanation above, a study of old women is important to do. Problems related to the oppressive influence of patriarchal culture on the autonomy possessed by old women are important to be studied with feminist perspectives. Therefore, this article discusses how oppressive patriarchal culture influences the autonomy possessed by old women.

Data analysis in this article uses theory of women existentialism from Simone de Beauvoir and theory of relational autonomy from Natalie Stoljar. Beauvoir explained that men are the Self, while women are the Other. If the Other is a threat to the Self, then women are a threat to men. Therefore, if a man wants to remain free, he must oppress women. Marriage is an oppressive institution for women. Marriage puts women as objects controlled by men. Since a very young age, women have been socialized to be those who accept, wait, and depend. Women get the doctrine that they need men to protect and save their lives. This doctrine explains that women cannot possibly live independently. This is the strategy of men to master and oppress women [6]. In the theory of relational autonomy, the process of internalization and legitimacy of patriarchal values in society is an attempt to weaken women's autonomy. However, the existence of social, cultural and historical aspects of life owned by women can encourage them to have power and ability to develop their autonomy. This concept of autonomy shows that autonomy is relational because it can develop with its developmental factors. Through theory of relational autonomy, women who experience gender-based injustice are not positioned as helpless victims. However, they have ability to develop as autonomous individuals against the dominant power over themselves. The various actions and decisions chosen by women are seen as an attempt to escape from domination [5].

This paper delivers the following key points: 1) explanation of power relations that inhibit the autonomy of old women; 2) patriarchal doctrines internalized in old women as the constraint being the autonomous self; 3) oppressive relations as the constraint of

old women's autonomy; 4) the ability of old women to develop autonomous self; and 5) conclusion which explain the summary of analysis and recommendations.

## 2 Analysis

### 2.1 Power Relations that Inhibit the Autonomy of Old Women in Their Old Age

Power relations are closely related to decision making by individuals. In the system of patriarchal culture, power is dominantly owned by men. Women only become the second ones and inferior so that it causes inequality of power relations between women and men. Women as inferior individuals have weak bargaining position [8].

Women in marriage will experience objectification by men. Marriage is a patriarchal institution that entangles women's freedom; restricted to determine women's own decisions [6]. This condition is in line with old women that experience power relations over them. Old women who live with their families, including husband, sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, grandchildren continue to experience inequality in power relations [9].

In this study, the subjects of study, Mbah Sri and Mbah Ipah faced power domination from her husband. Their husbands have more dominant position in the household. Husband is the one who has main power to make decisions related to family issues. The dominant position of husband is supported by factors such as housing ownership and patriarchal doctrine internalized in old women. In general, women only have roles in domestic area and care-work [10].

Mbah Sri explained that as her husband was angry, the husband often said the sentence of expulsion to Mbah Sri. The husband said that he owns the house, so Mbah Sri, his son and his grandchildren should not live there. When I asked Mbah Sri who was feared by Mbah Sri at home, Mbah Sri replied that the husband is the one she fears.

This is in accordance with theory of woman existentialism which explains that woman is Other and man is the Self. Woman is a threat to the Self, so man must subjugate and control women [6]. The subjugation by men causes inferiority and inequality in power relations as experienced by Mbah Sri with her husband.

The dominant power was entangled Mbah Sri in unpleasant situation with her husband. She explained that the superiority of her husband made meeting with her sister clandestinely. Mbah Sri met with her sister because Mbah Sri wanted to tell about her conditions. Mbah Sri felt that she could not stand any longer with her husband's behaviour worse to her.

Furthermore, the power relations faced by old women also come from the sons-in-law who lives with her. In this case, the power relations intersect indirectly between old women and their sons-in-law. The power of a son-in-law that affects the life of old women is found in Mbah Ningsih's story. The power of a son-in-law intersects with the lives of old woman through daughter who become wife. When the daughter becomes a wife, the power of her husband affects the daughter of the old women.

As a wife, Mbah Ningsih's daughter is the Other for her husband. The dominant power in the institution of her child's marriage is on the side of her son-in-law as the Self. Decisions made by the Self are rules that must be obeyed by the Other [6]. In

addition, Mbah Ningsih is also categorized as the Other who must obey the decision of the Self, his son-in-law.

In the story of Mbah Ningsih, the power of his son-in-law was seen in how Mbah Ningsih's daughter not willing to take Mbah Ningsih because she was not allowed by her husband. The disallowance happened because Mbah Ningsih expressed his feelings that were uncomfortable with her son-in-law. Then, the son-in-law was not pleased with the attitude of Mbah Ningsih and then disallow his wife, daughter of Mbah Ningsih to help Mbah Ningsih. Mbah Ningsih had to apologize first then her daughter was allowed to help Mbah Ningsih.

Furthermore, the power relations occurs between Mbah Laksmi and her son. Mbah Laksmi depends on two sons who live with her for financial resources. Mbah Laksmi explained that she did not dare to comment or complain to her sons because she fears that her sons will get angry. She only tells what her needs to be fulfilled. In addition, Mbah Laksmi also does not dare asking too much to her son's activities. Usually, Mbah Laksmi only asks where the child will go and reminds him not to forget the time.

In the story told by the old women, the lives of old women cannot be separated from domination of man power around them. Men, both as husband, son-in-law and son still have dominant position of power than old women. Dominant power relation of men put the old women in inferior position for decision making [8].

This condition is in line with Beauvoir's thought which explains that women bound to a marriage institution are always inferior and subordinate to men in a patriarchal cultural system [6]. Old women both as wives and mothers have always been subordinated to the interests of men around them. Subordination and objectification of old women entangle themselves as the weak individuals and hamper their autonomy. The old woman is the Other who must obey and comply to the Self, the man in the family both the husband, son and even her son-in-law.

## **2.2 Internalization of Oppressive Patriarchal Doctrine in Old Women**

Besides the inequality of power relations that makes men in the old women's family as more powerful to their families, there is internalization of patriarchal doctrine about stereotype of good wife in old women. The patriarchal doctrine puts women in marriage must become obedient and dependent on their husbands. This doctrine becomes the factor of men power over women more dominant and inhibits the autonomy of old women. The old women experience this condition as told by Mbah Sri, Mbah Ipah and Mbah Laksmi.

Marriage is an institution that gives oppression to women. Marriage puts women as objects controlled by men. Since childhood, women have been socialized to be those who accept, wait, and depend. Women get doctrine that they need men to protect and save their lives. This doctrine explains that women cannot possibly live independently. This is the strategy of men to dominate and oppress women [6].

The doctrine of patriarchal values about women's obedience to men explained by Beauvoir was internalized in Mbah Sri's perspective. According to Mbah Sri, a wife has an obligation to ask permission from her husband when she wants to do something. If the wife does not ask for permission from her husband, she commits a sin because her attitude does not reflect the act of being a good wife. Therefore, if Mbah Sri want to

do an activity, Mbah Sri must ask permission from her husband even though Mbah Sri hates the rude behaviour of her husband. Mbah Sri still behaves as a good wife by asking permission from her husband to do things so that she does not commit sin.

"Yes, if I don't ask for permission, I will commit sin. Yes, even though he is a deaf, I still must ask permission ... "(Mbah Sri, personal communication [in-person interview], 11 May 2019)

Furthermore, there is Mbah Ipah who accepts patriarchal doctrine that a good wife is one who obeys her husband and his decisions through parental teaching. Since a very young age, Mbah Ipah has always been explained that men are the heads of households who have a higher position than their wives. The wife is a figure who must reduce all problems in the household and be the one who succumbs. This is implied in Mbah Ipah's statement about how good women should be in the family.

"For me, as my parents told, we must able to take care of household. Advice from my mother, as woman, must look after the family. Do not let the bad thing of family looked by people. As a woman, must able to maintain, to reduce, to succumb. You can't be hard, if your opponent is hard, so there must be someone who succumbs ... "(Mbah Ipah, personal communication [in-person interview], 29 April 2019)

In Mbah Ipah's statement, patriarchal doctrine is internalized in women through the teachings and habits they receive from their families. Women are educated to be individuals who always succumb and are not good when fighting. When women fight, they are considered as rude and bad people. This condition causes men subordination to women. Power relations between women and men become unequal. Women become inferior group to making decisions. This is in line with Beauvoir's idea explaining that the doctrine positioned women as impossible to live independently. Since childhood, women have been socialized to be individuals that accept, wait, and depend [6].

The condition of women who are positioned as waiting and dependent groups is in line with Beauvoir's thoughts and experienced by Mbah Ipah in her young age. Beauvoir's thought that women had been indoctrinated with values which discriminate to them did indeed occur in women's lives. It has been brought up to their lifetime. The story of a woman indoctrinated into an inferior side is told by Mbah Ipah. Mbah Ipah is a daughter of headman in her village. Mbah Ipah explained that during her young age, Mbah Ipah rarely socialized with people around her house. Mbah Ipah is not permitted to appear publicly because a girl is not good if she is often outside the house. Woman should be at home, take care of housework and receive education to be a good wife and Other in the future. The role of woman in the household is the responsible one for all domestic works. Therefore, woman must take educational program such as manners, and woman skills such as sewing and cooking. This set of rules is applied in Mbah Ipah's family.

Due to the deprivation of Mbah Ipah's public space, Mbah Ipah explained that she felt insecure and not confident when stay outside the house. Mbah Ipah felt very embarrassed if she was in a public space and met with many people especially with man. Mbah Ipah's education is always in the school for girl. After graduating from the school of cooking at the Vocational School, Mbah Ipah was arranged to marry someone by her parents and

married at the age of 18. Mbah Ipah explained that when she was arranged to marry someone, she did not know who her future husband was. However, Mbah Ipah accepted the match and obey his parents' decision. Through Mbah Ipah story, the patriarchal doctrine that puts women as those always accept, wait and depend is internalized in Mbah Ipah since her youth. Mbah Ipah was constructed being the Other from her own society.

Furthermore, the doctrine explaining that women cannot possibly live independently and always depend on men is justified by Mbah Laksmi's situation with her life story. Women are figures who depend, accept and wait. Women will not be able to be independent and always rely on men [6]. In her life story, Mbah Laksmi is a person who depends her life on her husband. Mbah Laksmi explained that during the marriage, she was only at home being a housewife and taking care of domestic works. Mbah Laksmi did the works because she believes that the duty of women as a wife and mother is to take care of the house and do domestic works while the duties of men are breadwinners. Therefore, Mbah Laksmi always depends on her husband in everything until her husband dies. When telling her condition that was left by her husband, Mbah Laksmi always cried. After the husband's death, Mbah Laksmi had to fulfill her own needs and depend on her son.

Through the stories of the three research subjects, I saw how patriarchal culture was internalized and normalized as a way of life for old women. Patriarchal cultural values put old women to live as inferior ones compared to men. Women become the ones always dominated by the power of men, always succumb to the difficult conditions that occur to them. This condition is in line with Beauvoir's idea that patriarchal culture indoctrinates women to be inferior figures who always accept, wait and depend. Women cannot be independent ones and must rely on men. Men are the ruling ones and have the right to control women [6].

### **2.3 Oppressive Relationships to Old Women**

When a woman is bound to a marriage, she must act as a good wife and obey her husband. Women are ones who must obey their husbands as the owners of power over them. Beauvoir argues that in patriarchal culture, men as the Self and women as the Other assume that the Other is a threat to the Self. Therefore, women are a threat for men. If men want to remain free and not threatened with women, they must oppress women. Marriage is one institution that creates oppression to women. Marriage indoctrinates women as subordinate ones and objects for men [6].

The position of women as objects and dominated by men in marital institution results an oppressive relationship. This still occurs in old woman life. This condition is explained in story delivered by Mbah Sri who lived together with her rude husband. Her husband behaves rudely and oppresses Mbah Sri. Her husband often makes harsh words and hurts Mbah Sri. This situation made Mbah Sri's life become uncomfortable and suffering. Every day Mbah Sri must endure facing her husband who often yells, curses and gets angry to her.

Mbah Sri explained that her husband's rude attitude arose because he got jealous with his son and accused his son having an affair with Mbah Sri. This jealousy arose when her husband saw Mbah Sri being washed by her son after finishing defecation. At

that time, Mbah Sri was indeed seriously ill and could not do anything. Therefore, her son helped cleanse Mbah Sri because no one else could do it. At first, Mbah Sri asked her granddaughter for help, but she was unwilling and finally asked her father to help Mbah Sri. Mbah Sri said that her husband saw the activity and made him jealous. The attitude of the husband towards Mbah Sri is an oppressive act that torments Mbah Sri's old age life.

## 2.4 Old Women and Her Autonomy

In patriarchal culture that puts women as objects, subordination and marginalization of women is a common thing. The subordination and marginalization come from the doctrine of patriarchal understanding in women and society. This doctrine is internalized and legitimized as a valid and perpetuated norm. The patriarchal doctrine states that men have control over the lives of women, men are the main source of well-being for women, and women are the ones fully responsible for maintaining the order of relationships in life [5].

Referring to the empirical conditions regarding patriarchal doctrine, the process of internalization and legitimacy of patriarchal values in society is an attempt to weaken women's autonomy. However, the existence of social, cultural and historical aspects of life that women have encourages women to be able developing their autonomy. This concept of autonomy shows that autonomy is relational because it can develop with the developmental factors [5].

Through theory of relational autonomy, women who experience gender-based injustice are not positioned as helpless victims. However, women are capable and empowered to develop themselves as autonomous individuals against the dominant power over themselves. Various actions and decisions made by women are seen as efforts to escape from power that dominates them.

The unpleasant situation experienced by old women in their old age does not make them passively accept the situation. Old women explain that even though they have to face unpleasant conditions, they make efforts to survive in line with their decisions. This explains how old women in their old age have an awareness to become autonomous self. The old women in their old age, after experiencing various unpleasant conditions, realized that she did not want to be an inferior, helpless, subordinate and marginalized person. Old women have the awareness to be empowered, negotiate and make decisions about their lives.

This was revealed by all research subjects. The research subjects consciously have become autonomous self through their attitudes and choices to make decisions about the lives in old age. Old women refuse to be dominated by patriarchal culture and unequal power relations that still surround them. This condition was conveyed by the old women in their stories.

Mbah Sri explained that she decided not to share a room with her husband. Mbah Sri chose to sleep separately with her husband because Mbah Sri was uncomfortable and angry with her husband's behaviour. Mbah Sri also explained that as her husband scolded Mbah Sri and accused her with rude things, Mbah Sri dared to answer and defend herself. I got information from Mbah Sri's neighbour that she often heard Mbah Sri and her husband arguing. Mbah Sri dare to fight the accusations and harsh sentences

said by the husband. Mbah Sri explained that she now dared to fight the domination of her husband because Mbah Sri was in the right position. Mbah Sri never did what the husband accused to her. Therefore, Mbah Sri must defend herself and do not want to continue to be cornered by her husband.

Furthermore, Mbah Ipah who currently decides to choose what need and not to be conveyed to her husband. I see how Mbah Ipah has the power to determine decisions and show her autonomy. Mbah Ipah explained that she will not convey all information she got to her husband. Mbah Ipah will sort out whether the information needs to be submitted to her husband or not. In fact, from the background of life that has been narrated in the previous explanation, Mbah Ipah is positioned as the inferior and subordinate one. However, through this condition, Mbah Ipah proves that even though she lives and influenced by a culture that marginalizes her, Mbah Ipah still has autonomy in her. However, Mbah Ipah does not yet have an awareness of her autonomy because he has been indoctrinated with patriarchal values that make herself inferior. The following is an explanation from Mbah Ipah about how he sorted out the information conveyed to her husband:

"I also, if there is any information, if indeed it is necessary to tell it to Mbah Kakung, I tell him. But not all of them. Yes, there is also acceptance of him. So Mbah Kakung, accept or not. Maybe Mbah Kakung also do that to me. So not all the information is told to me." (Mbah Ipah, personal communication [in-person interview], 29 April 2019)

The three research subjects, Mbah Yati, Mbah Ningsih, and Mbah Laksmi explained that they would not depend on their children and would live independently. Mbah Yati said that she would not come to live with her son if he remarried. Mbah Yati chose to live alone independently so there was no limitation for her. Furthermore, Mbah Ningsih also explained that if her daughter planned to move from her house, Mbah Ningsih did not object. When Mbah Ningsih needed help to drive her away, Mbah Ningsih would ask help from Others. Mbah Laksmi also said the same thing with Mbah Yati that when later her sons were married, Mbah Laksmi chose to live alone or together with her daughter and grandchild. If later on the day the girl also remarries, Mbah Laksmi choose to live alone and ask her neighbors for help if she needs. The following is the narrative delivered by those old women:

"I think no ... (laughs) it's good to be here, even though the condition like this. The next door, moved to Pemalang, only half a month stay there. She said 'I do not enjoy in my son-in-law house, I don't feel at home. It's good when I am at my own home..' Yes, it's true.. If you are on my age, no husband, all children are married. It is better to live at our own home. If I want to go traveling ... Playing for a while, easier ... " (Mbah Yati, personal communication [in-person interview], 25 April 2019)

"The proof is that there were always someone helped me.. I don't expect too much. We know that if we expect too much to someone, then they reject, we will be disappointed, right. But if God that gives us, it is a blessing. Just that. All I



returned there, no problem. It's better, there's no burden." (Mbah Ningsih, personal communication [in-person interview], 24 April 2019)

"I am better alone. Not following my sons, no. Two of them. My daughter, if she is remarried, I won't be going to "follow there", that's how it is. I think this heart can't do that. Just like that" (Mbah Laksmi, personal communication [in-person interview], 25 April 2019)

Based on these narratives, the old women are actually those who have autonomy to make choices in their lives. Old women are able to reflect on the conditions they experience, and produce knowledge related to the strategies they must do to become autonomous self. When demonstrating their autonomy in making decisions, old women do experience contact with the power possessed by their sons, husband and son-in-law and with doctrine of patriarchal values that have been internalized in their daily thinking and habits. However, with the existence of social factors and the life experiences that they got, old women developed into autonomous selves to make their own decisions to be an autonomous self, old women need to have the two abilities described by Natalie Stoljar.

Those ability are ability to do self-reflection on her condition and ability to produce self-knowledge in herself about the oppressive conditions that surround her. The ability to do self-reflection means woman can understand that she is in oppressive condition and realizes that she needs to free herself from the situation. Furthermore, the ability to produce self-knowledge means that women have the ability and knowledge to strategically deal with the oppressive conditions they experience [5].

Four research subjects are aware that they are in oppressive condition and are able to produce knowledge to strategically deal with the condition. Awareness to be able reflecting on her condition which experienced oppression and her ability to produce knowledge develop old women as self-possessing autonomy. The ability to reflect on her condition is discovered from the narrative of research subjects who did not want to continue the uncomfortable life conditions. The research subjects explained that they had awareness to escape from their oppressive life as told by Mbah Sri, Mbah Yati, Mbah Ningsih dan Mbah Laksmi.

Furthermore, awareness of ability to do self-reflection causes the presence of knowledge to strategically deals with power that entangles old women. The presence of strategies shows that subjects have the ability to produce knowledge. In this case, the strategies carried out by the research subjects are different. Mbah Yati, Mbah Sri, Mbah Laksmi and Mbah Ningsih chose to live independently and did not move to their children's homes. In addition, Mbah Ipah chose to filter the information she got before it was delivered to her husband.

Based on Stoljar, those conditions experienced by the subjects of study showed that subjects are autonomous self and developed through the conditions that oppressed them. Old women have the power to reflect on their conditions and produce knowledge to strategically out the oppression that is happening to them.

### 3 Conclusion and Recommendation

Patriarchal values that put women under men are still lasting in society. Women are perceived as subordinate, marginal and inferior ones. This explains that unequal power relations are still experienced by women in their lives. The unequal power relations also affect women's autonomy in decisions regarding their lives.

Patriarchal culture puts women as inferior ones, lower self-confidence than men, and more domestic burdens. It is patriarchal cultural factor that causes the old women to be less active than the old men in their old age. In addition, the factor also show that old women are in discriminatory and oppressive environment. This situation is a form of gender-based injustice experienced by old women in their old age. Inferiority experienced by old women shows problems related to autonomy. The issue of autonomy is important to be studied as an effort to provide solutions for injustice in old women.

Through a study of autonomy of old women, we can see how patriarchal culture causes discrimination and oppression of women even at their old age. In addition, we can see how patriarchal values that cause discrimination, inequality of power and oppressive relations for old women inhibit them to make decisions and become autonomous ones.

The oppressive situation experienced by old women does not make them powerless to have autonomy. Old women have the power to do self-reflection and produce knowledge of strategies they must do to become autonomous. When presenting their autonomy in making decisions, old women deal with the power possessed by their son, husband, son-in-law and the doctrine of patriarchal values. However, the social factors and life experiences that they have, they develop into autonomous ones.

Based on above analytical discussion, this paper has two recommendations. The first one is for the family of old women to be a good support system for them. The form of support provided is not only material support, but psychological support that strengthens and encourages old women to live their old lives with confidence. In addition, neighbours and relatives around old women should also motivate old women to live their lives vigorously and empowered.

The second recommendation is that the government should develop policies aimed to increase the capacity of old women including integrated health services, training on economic independence, financial planning and business capital lending, and presenting old-friendly infrastructure, especially for old women who have different needs than old men.

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