



## A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION OF ACEHNESE WOMAN: WARRIOR OR PACIFIST TRAIT?

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### Abstract

The relationship between Acehese women and the conflict has become an exciting discourse to be studied more deeply. It is inseparable from the struggle of Acehese women, who are known to be mighty on the battlefield against the invaders. This research argues that the character traits of Acehese women in the context of conflict have changed. In the past, Acehese women appeared to be icons of war heroes and now tend to be in the 'grey area', not being extreme in showing resistance or being the initiators of peace. This research attempts to elaborate on the conditions that allow these differences in character to occur. The researchers argue, by using research data collected from documentation and interviews, it is concluded that women are closely correlated with peace. Women have great potential to bring about peace. This research shows that this condition is influenced by gender subordination, limiting women's space for movement. The surrounding community seems to place the issue of war and peace in the domain of men. In addition, the absence of gender-wise policies should be considered an obstacle to the emergence of Acehese women as pacifists.

**Keywords:** Acehese women, War, peace, Conflict, Gender.



## UMA ANÁLISE SOCIOPOLÍTICA DA TRANSFORMAÇÃO DO CARÁTER DA MULHER ACENHANA: TRAÇO DE GUERREIRO OU PACIFISTA?

### Resumo

A relação entre as mulheres de Aceh e o conflito tornou-se um discurso instigante a ser estudado mais profundamente. É inseparável da luta das mulheres de Aceh, conhecidas por serem poderosas no campo de batalha contra os invasores. Esta pesquisa argumenta que os traços de caráter das mulheres acehenses no contexto do conflito mudaram. No passado, as mulheres acehenses pareciam ser ícones de heróis de guerra e agora tendem a estar na “área cinzenta”, não sendo extremas em mostrar resistência ou serem as iniciadoras da paz. Esta pesquisa tenta elaborar as condições que permitem que essas diferenças de caráter ocorram. Os pesquisadores argumentam, usando dados de pesquisa coletados de documentação e entrevistas, conclui-se que as mulheres estão intimamente relacionadas com a paz. As mulheres têm um grande potencial para trazer a paz. Esta pesquisa mostra que essa condição é influenciada pela subordinação de gênero, limitando o espaço de movimento das mulheres. A comunidade circundante parece colocar a questão da guerra e da paz no domínio dos homens. Além disso, a ausência de políticas de gênero deve ser considerada um obstáculo ao surgimento de mulheres de Aceh como pacifistas.

**Palavras-chave:** Mulheres de Aceh, Guerra, paz, Conflito, Gênero.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of Acehnese women cannot be separated from the issue of resistance and struggle. History records that Acehnese women took part on the battlefield and could even emerge as heroic icons. The world even recognizes the contribution of Acehnese women in fighting for independence. This research aims to elaborate on and describe the characteristics of Acehnese women, which the researchers consider pretty interesting (Azevedo & Fernandes, 2020; Silva et al., 2021).

Many female heroes were born in the land of Aceh. There are Cut Nyak Dhien, Cut Nyak Meutia, Admiral Keumalahayati and others. Their struggle is known to be very tough in fighting and expelling the Dutch colonialists from the land of Aceh. The spirit of nationalism and *jihad fi sabilillah* (one who fights for the cause of Allah Almighty) encouraged Acehnese women fighters to take up arms, apart from the assumption that their struggle was a form of revenge for the death of their husbands or close people in the hands of the invaders.

The struggle and resistance of Acehnese women continued even though the war with the Dutch colonialists had ended in 1903. Again, in 1976 Aceh was involved in a conflict with the Indonesian Government, which was driven by the Aceh Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF), also known as *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM) or The Free Aceh Movement. This armed struggle was intensively carried out until finally, on 15 August 2005, the



Memorandum of Understanding in Helsinki Finland (also known as MoU Helsinki) was passed, marking the end of the conflict (Ramadhani, 2019; Faganello & Muniz Fiuza Neto, 2021).

During the reign of Sultan Alaidin Ali Riayat Syah IV Saidil Mukammil (1589-1604), The Inong Balee Fleet was born. This fleet consists of widows (*inong balee*) led by Admiral Keumalahayati, who later became legendary as the world's first female admiral. Keumalahayati herself trained about 2000 widows in a fort, namely *Benteng Inong Balee* or The Inong Balee Fort (Masrizal et al., 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2018; Ninomiya et al., 2021)

The struggle and resistance of The Inong Balee Fleet continued in the conflict involving GAM against the Indonesian Government. However, the term *inong balee* has expanded its meaning to become women's troops who joined GAM. Their roles also vary from taking up arms, procuring logistics, managing soup kitchens, maintenance, and others ( Samier & ElKaleh, 2021; Borges et al., 2020).

The depiction of Acehnese women in the conflict is quite dynamic. This condition reinforces the view that Acehnese women are not only victims of conflict or terror but can play a more active role as conflict subjects. They can take quite strategic roles in a resistance movement. The story of Keumalahayati with The Inong Balee Fleet and other female heroes has clearly described this role.

The depiction of the character trait that is awakened in Acehnese women is a 'warrior'. Of course, the use of this term is not harmful or negates their central role. The process of actively involving Acehnese women on the battlefield was a form of nationalism and following the demands of religion and society. Even the track record of Acehnese women on the battlefield is a matter of pride for the Indonesian people.

During the Indonesian Government and GAM conflict, many Acehnese women were involved and had specific roles in GAM. On the contrary, the contribution of Acehnese women was minimal after the conflict, and sometimes it was not easy to find them, especially concerning the peace process or recovery. This fact is ironic considering that Acehnese women are the most often victims, both physically and psychologically.

This condition prompted the researchers to investigate why Acehnese women have no 'pacifist trait' like the legendary 'warrior trait'? How did this change occur? This question becomes quite reasonable considering that women have the most significant potential to become agents of peace, which many parties even consider a woman's nature. If so many Acehnese women heroes took part in the war of independence, of course, in times of peace, Acehnese women could also make an equally important contribution. If women are actively involved in a war, the same should also occur in times of peace or post-war recovery.

By looking at several cases of conflict that place women as victims and parties actively involved too—say in Rwanda, Burundi, or Liberia, the role of Acehnese women is



very minimal. The role of women in Rwanda or Burundi becomes exceedingly crucial, and even their contribution is very potential in aspects of economic, social, and political recovery. Furthermore, they become peacekeepers and have been active in every international peace operation (Zeitlin, 2005). This event makes the research on the role of Acehnese women interesting for further research.

There have been several previous studies related to the role of Acehnese women and peace. The research conducted by Ismiati entitled "*Eksistensi Aktivis Perempuan dalam Mewujudkan Perdamaian di Aceh*" or "The Existence of Women Activists in Realizing Peace in Aceh" focuses on the contribution made by women's activities in Aceh in the form of strengthening the role of women in defending themselves, their families, and community members (Ismiati, 2016). Another research entitled "*Peran Gerakan Perempuan dalam Reintegrasi Perempuan Eks-Kombatan Pasca Konflik: Studi Atas Liga Inong Aceh (LINA)*" or "The Role of the Women's Movement in the Reintegration of Post-Conflict Women Ex-Combatants: The Research of the Aceh Inong League (LINA)" written by Anna Christi Suwardi and Eric Hiariej. This research found that LINA is a post-conflict women's movement present as a forum for women ex-combatants and provides briefings that encourage the reintegration process (Suwardi, 2015).

Another research related to this issue is the work of Sentiela Ocktaviana et al. entitled "*Peran-Peran Perempuan di Wilayah Konflik: Antara Korban, Penyintas, dan Agen Perdamaian*" or "The Roles of Women in Conflict Areas: Between Victims, Survivors, and Peace Agents". This research examines the role of women in two conflict areas in Indonesia, namely Aceh and West Nusa Tenggara. The research results show that the role of women is still seen as less meaningful and is often placed only as a victim when in fact, they are capable of playing an important role. In addition, the fulfillment of justice and women's rights is the responsibility of both the central and local governments (Ocktaviana et al., 2014).

In contrast to previous research or writings, this research aims to explore further post-conflict Acehnese women who experienced changes in displaying character traits or figures. Furthermore, this research also tries to present the conditions faced by Acehnese women, which may be a solution for possible changes for the empowerment of Acehnese women in the future.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is descriptive analysis, a branch of qualitative research methods. This research aims to describe, analyze, and make a systematic and accurate description of the topic to be studied. In this research, the researchers want to describe and analyze the dynamics of the Acehnese women's character development during the post-conflict period. In



preparing this research, the researchers require data following the research studies. Data collection techniques used are documentation studies and interviews. After the required data is obtained, the researchers analyze the data by systematically compiling the data obtained to facilitate researchers in understanding cases and presenting them as findings ( Zeitlin, 2005).

The data obtained from the interviews were then reviewed with the theory adopted and then analyzed by the researcher to obtain a research result. Data analysis was carried out using descriptive analysis techniques to describe the situation and conduct analysis based on the data obtained to obtain a research result.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The patriarchal ideology introduced by the Dutch weakened the position of Acehese women, which was quite strong with a matrilineal tradition—which in Acehese is known as *po rumoh*, followed by the new order era, which domesticated women through massive social and political control (Renuka & Srimulyani, 2015). The existence of gender subordination prevents Acehese women from freely moving into the realm of peace-war, which is considered men's territory. Gender-biased policies also contributed to minimizing the involvement of Acehese women in the public sphere, especially concerning peace and rehabilitation efforts.

#### 3.1. Post-conflict Acehese women

In some post-conflict areas, women often appear as agents of reconciliation. In Mataram, for example, after the conflict between Muslims and Christians on 17 January, 2000 or often referred to as *Konflik Satu Tujuh Satu* or The 171 Battle, the women's movement was able to offer a model of reconciliation that the church could adopt to reconstruct church ecclesiology so that it remains relevant to the multicultural and multi-religious context of Indonesia ( Samier & ElKaleh, 2021).

As explained by Asyathri et al., (2014), the presence of women in the post-communal conflict period in Maluku—particularly in the informal sector such as in traditional markets—can influence the Maluku conflict resolution process. The activities of Papalele or women traders in Ambon city can unwittingly help the conflict resolution process. Their role in peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding stages makes them an anomaly in conflict resolution and diplomacy research.

The role of women as agents of peace does not only occur in Indonesia. In the Republic of Burundi, one of the countries on the African continent, women have an essential





and central role as peacekeepers ( Ramadhani, 2019). The existence of Burundian women becomes vital with the existence of a quota of 30% women in the realm of government who can make regulations that prioritize women and children, especially after the civil war. With that provision, Burundian women succeeded in recommending the integration of women's rights in the peace process in Burundi, including the implementation of legal mechanisms to eliminate gender discrimination and gender immunity based on war crimes.

Women's roles in Mataram, Maluku, Indramayu, and Burundi contradict what happened in Aceh. Christi Suwardi (2015) stated that the presence of Acehese women was very worrying, especially female ex-combatants who were dubbed the *Inong Balee* troops as a unit with GAM during the conflict. Their rights are not accommodated in the Helsinki MoU. The reality of the injustice of the peace program against women ex-combatants then initiated the birth of LINA on 11 June 2006, a forum or extension of *Inong Balee* (women ex-combatants) after the conflict ended. With LINA, women ex-combatants who were forgotten during the peace period find a place to continue their existence. In fact, in realizing peace, Acehese women struggle and play a strategic role to defend themselves, their families, and their communities (Ismiati, 2016). Women activists actively carry out various forms of capacity building, strengthening, and empowerment, especially for women and contributing to development.

The economic gap faced by Acehese women, including *inong balee*, is caused by the pattern of power played by the elite male combatant post-peace. The elite combatants formed a kind of shadow government, namely *Komite Peralihan Aceh* (KPA) or The Aceh Transitional Committee, to legitimize power in various areas in Aceh by ensuring the welfare of their groups. Ironically, there are only three female combatants in this institution.

Meanwhile, in the world of politics, the role of women is limited because several things influence it. First, in terms of education. In this case, acehese women in this case, *inong balee* did not get an education to the ideal level to fight in the world of politics. Second, rampant violence and killings during elections in Aceh caused women to fear and withdraw from political participation because any violence and killings that occurred could not be separated from internal conflicts of interest. Third, the influence of pressure on religious narratives built by religious authorities in Aceh—in this case, *ulama kharismatik* or clerics—about women who should not be leader decreases public interest in electing women leaders.

In addition, since Aceh imposed Islamic law, Acehese women have often been targeted. The Qanun formulated so far tends to harm and discredit women. As an example, it can be seen in The Article concerning Rape on The Qanun of Jinayat. Other regional regulations in Aceh also often position women as objects, for example, the prohibition of sitting astride while on a motorbike, raids on clothes and tight pants, prohibiting going out at night and hanging out in cafes with someone who is not their *mahram* (family member with



whom marriage would be considered illegal in Islam). From this condition, not a few Acehese women were critical of the regulations in the Qanun, which were considered inhumane. The antithesis of the women's criticism then led to a counter-narrative that led to accusations and gave women a liberal label.

Currently, there is an affirmative rule in politics in the form of providing a 30% quota for women. However, the impact of this policy has not been able to make Acehese women succeed in appearing in the public sphere with an offer of exciting ideas. According to Musdawati (2017), the impact of the 30% quota policy is that it requires parties to include women in their candidacy, while the party does not have a recruitment and education mechanism for cadres, especially female cadres. This condition makes the party open up opportunities for every female cadre to register without providing specific qualifications as a condition. As a result, female cadres who do not have experience in politics and organizations may also be caught.

The primary responsibility of women in the domestic area. However, when entering the public sphere, especially in politics, domestic tasks are the main tasks that must be completed. As a result, women experience a double task. On the other hand, the existence of women in politics is seen as "stranger" because it is considered contrary to social views. Politics is imaged as a masculine area, which can be seen from the rules set by the party, the way of communicating, the way of relating, all of which show that male values are the dominant values that must be adapted. For women to survive in politics, women must adopt these masculine values.

Several female cadres stated that party meetings were the most stressful because everyone was allowed to speak big, rebuke, and even fight to defend their arguments (Murdawati 2017), This situation makes women who enter and are involved as party cadres feel uncomfortable with situations that are contrary to the values they believe in. Ironically, the ability to negotiate is non-existent, so women have to accept the situation; otherwise, leaving the party is their choice.

According to Hasbi Amiruddin, after Indonesia's independence, no Acehese women were as heroic as the royal era, who were able to appear on the national and international scene (Amiruddin, 2014). This condition was triggered by the prolonged conflict in Aceh, both internal and external. The conflict only left suffering, poverty, and human rights violations, and they lost the opportunity to get a better education. These factors are very influential in bringing someone into a character.

However, research conducted by Fauzi Abubakar at the gampong (village) level showed that the involvement of women in the Tuha Peut Gampong institution began to increase (Fauzi Abubakar, 2015; Masrizal. et all, 2020). *Lembaga Tuha Peut* or Council of Four Elders, is the deliberative organization of *gampong* or village, whose function is to



protect customs, make *gampong* regulations, accommodate and channel the local community's aspirations, and carry out adequate supervision of the implementation of the *gampong* administration.

According to (Fauzi Abubakar, 2015), the women's role in these institutions is equal to that of men and is even very important. As in disputes in society, women's skills as mediators and negotiators are very decisive in resolving these cases. Likewise, in preserving customs, such as marriage customs, whose implementation is regulated by women. Meanwhile, in implementing the *gampong* administration, women also formulate *gampong* policies, such as making *reusam* or *gampong* regulations.

Different opinions regarding the role of women in *Lembaga Tuha Peut* were put forward by Mahmuddin (2019). According to him, the involvement and representation of women in the *Lembaga Tuha Peut* structure are still relatively weak and have not yet entirely played an active role (Mahmuddin, 2019). In the patriarchal culture, which places women as a second class, there is still an assumption that women are not capable of being actors in *gampong* development and involved in dispute resolution, which is a fundamental problem of the repositioning of women in *gampong* institutions today.

Research conducted by Ahmad (2015) shows that Acehese women have experienced quite a tremendous leap in entering changes for the sake of changes in Aceh. If women have not been able to become the main actors in determining public policy, then women experience different conditions in the private sector. Even further, the presence of women in Aceh has dominated the roadside areas (Pertamina Girls, Corn Grilled Girls, Cafe Girls, and Laundry Girls). This condition shows that Acehese women who have been wracked by decades of conflict have their survival strategies. The Aceh government should realize this valuable potential by increasing the role of women and opening more access through affirmative action for these potential women to be active in local government so that their ideas can be formalized and made into more implementable policies.

### 3.2. Character Transformation of Acehese Women: Past and Present

The involvement of Acehese women during the Dutch colonial period has brought crucial changes to the Acehese women's lives. The changes have placed the Acehese women in the domestication, especially in the peace and rehabilitation context. Domestication might be the proper term due to the Acehese women's drastic actions during the conflict, but they became calm after the vertical conflicts with the central government. Women's domestication can be named housewifization ( Samier & EIKaleh, 2021). Terminologically, it is an understanding of placing women as domestic beings. Their roles are only limited to the household chores, such as cooking, washing, sweeping, mopping, taking





care of the children, preparing for the needs of family members, fulfilling the husband's sexual request, and doing home care. The understanding implied that the women's participation in public was unnecessary; they had no roles in public affairs because of the chores. Rogers (1980) claimed that the domestication of women in household matters and child care could be referred to as an act of social discrimination. The characteristics of Acehnese women who become peacemakers cannot be pinned down like the Acehnese fighters' characteristics because their presence with a peaceful character does not dominate the peace process itself. Skjelsbaek (2001) asserted that the peace characters become interesting in this context as women are closely correlated to peace, although it is not absolute. If access to war allows women's involvement, it would be equal to the peace process. However, in many conditions, the women's character as a peacemaker does not appear. This condition appears in Acehnese women who lost their peace character. Have there been characteristic changes in the Acehnese women?

This transformation can be traced from the life history of the Acehnese people when the Dutch came to Aceh. The Netherlands introduces patriarchal ideology and criticizes the existence of women in public. However, this ideology does not apply to the matriarchal tradition in Aceh. The tradition gives women a broad social and cultural authority known as *nyang poe rumoh*, the house owner (Jones, 2017). It implies that the Acehnese women have considerable power over themselves and do not depend on others. After Aceh had joined the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, the policies of the new order era related to the women's role were also changed. The Social control by the New Order regime was very repressive towards the women's movement and even seemed to determine the main points of being a woman. Julia Suryakusuma, an activist and author, named this *ibuisme negara* (translated as state motherism - a view placing women as unpaid domestic workers to support state capitalism) (Suryakusuma, 1987). The statement means that men are placed at the center of policymakers while women are prioritized as mothers and housewives (Ramadhani, 2019).

Suryakusuma (1987) argued that state motherism was promoted by the state under the New Order government with two objectives; women have to be loyal and obedient partners to their husbands, and they should not be involved in the decision-making process. To achieve the goals, the government provides three types of support. First, the top-down hierarchy and feudal organization structure started from the President to the head of a village's wife in the form of the Family Welfare Movement (PKK) in rural areas.

Second, women's domestication programs through nationally implemented programs, for example, PKK. PKK, Dharma Wanita (organization of civil servant wives), and Dharma Pertiwi organized activities related to the women's position in the household. Third, the socialization of the housewives' ideology was promoted by a state-supported women's



organization, namely the Indonesian Women's Congress (KOWANI). This organization is an umbrella of 55 women's organizations. KOWANI is claimed to be the single-vehicle for Indonesian women, promoting Panca Dharma Wanita's ideology (five women's responsibilities as a wife). A woman is a husband's loyal partner, a nation procreator, a kid's educator and mentor, a housekeeper, and a helpful society member ( Samier & ElKaleh, 2021).

This state motherism also impacts the women's lives in Aceh. The Acehnese women are placed in the prominent position as mothers and wives and, at the same time, indirectly weaken their roles in other aspects.

Balawyn Jones (2017) explained that historically, the matrilineal relationship between women and the home had empowered women by placing them at the center of the family and society (Jones, 2017). However, if it is interpreted in the context of the restrictive gender norms of state motherism, matrilineal culture reaffirms that home is the only proper place for women.

This means that women should only take care of private matters such as educating children, taking care of their husbands, and doing household chores. Thus, it cannot be denied that one of the most challenging obstacles for women entering the peace process and taking part in an agreement is the existence of traditional beliefs and the cultural practices that govern what is and is not appropriate for women to do (Porter, 2007; Suwardi, 2015).

This condition weakens the role of women in Aceh to be further involved in peace. In addition, community beliefs hinder their fighting spirit from participating in the peace and rehabilitation process. In many cultures, the involvement of women in specific fields is considered taboo. (Lee-Koo, 2012; Zeitlin, 2005) asserted that men find it embarrassing to have women represent them at peace talks. This also includes patriarchy, which makes it difficult for women to enter the realm of men. Some of the patriarchal problems, social and cultural construction privilege men over women and can also be seen as a paradigm for other forms of authoritarianism, hierarchy, and inequality (Akhtar, 2017; Jenkins & Betty A. Reardon, 2007). In several post-conflict cases in Aceh, the Acehnese women, specifically female combatants, want to be directly involved in the peace and recovery process.

However, the local Ulema claimed that their involvement was inappropriate. In contrast, these women and female combatants became the backbone in the past when their husbands were at war. These women are even willing to take themselves to their husbands when they need them. However, the same conditions do not apply when peace has been achieved. The definition of a combatant is a party that is active and directly involved in the war and does not include women in it. As a result, the interests of female combatants such as *Inong Balee* or other women who become the direct victims of the conflict have not been



fully accommodated (Rahmawati et al., 2019). The Helsinki MoU does not explicitly mention the existence of a post-conflict women's agency.

The Acehese women, especially ex-combatants, are actors who have played a dual role during the conflict period. They became the power wing of the Free Aceh Movement both militarily and non-militarily and also became victims of the conflict itself. When conflicts ended with the agreement of Helsinki, women ex-combatants were forgotten in the context of the benefits of the Aceh peace program. Women should be given equal portions and roles to men in creating peace. When the role of women is abolished in negotiations, gender inclusivity is closed (Porter, 2007). Finally, men will appoint other men to formulate, reconstruct, and formulate a peace plan without women's involvement. The character of Acehese women who should emerge as peace fighters did not go well because they had to be constrained by matters of public trust and also unsupported regulations.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The transformation of the character trait of Acehese women during the conflict to post-conflict is influenced by several factors. Starting from the influence exerted by the Dutch on the matrilineal concept of Acehese society to continue with the restraint on the role of women in the public sphere during the New Order era. However, it must be admitted that there has been a degradation in understanding the role of Acehese women then and now. It is ironic because, in the past, Acehese women had an important place in the public sphere, while currently, they are only content to play a dominant role in the private sphere.

Acehese women have a pacifist trait as strong as the warrior one. However, the current environment and people's thinking no longer gender-wise has dampened this pacifist trait. Instead of being able to play a different role in the peace and post-conflict process, Acehese women must fight for their lives and their family responsibilities. The pacifist trait of Acehese women should not collide with a debilitating culture and unsupportive regulations. Furthermore, there is a need for gender-mainstreaming regulations or policies that demand a more significant role for women in the recovery and development process in post-conflict Aceh.

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