



#### Research Article

# Resilience and Matriarchal Values: A Study of Women and Single Mothers in the Minangkabau Community

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#### Abstract.

In the matriarchal Minangkabau community of West Sumatra, women's roles are often downplayed despite their substantial engagement in both public and private life. This study aimed to uncover the unique value system embraced by Minangkabau women, particularly their resilience and exemplary practices that contribute to local sustainable development. Women's mental well-being is closely tied to global sustainable development goals, spanning education, non-communicable disease reduction, and social protection. Poverty-induced depression is common among widowed women worldwide, underscoring the need to explore how Minangkabau women respond to contemporary challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and economic hardships. Resilience, a central theme, is shaped by spiritual and environmental factors, fostering overall well-being. The "saparuik" family in Minangkabau society strengthens familial bonds and plays a pivotal role in nurturing resilience. The matrilineal kinship structure offers social security to families, but its impact on women's resilience amid modern challenges requires further investigation. This study employed qualitative methods, specifically a case study design, to examine women's experiences in rural areas (Padang Pariaman Regency) and urban settings (Padang City). Interviews with these women revealed a common thread despite their diverse backgrounds. While the Minangkabau matriarchal system may limit women's influence within the family's "saparuik," women consistently embody strong matriarchal ideals when facing adversity. This research enhances our understanding of gender roles in matriarchal systems and underscores women's crucial contributions to broader sustainable development. Minangkabau women's resilience serves as a testament to their resilience and their ability to address contemporary challenges, making significant strides toward achieving sustainable development goals.

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## 1. Introduction

The matrilineal system is a line of kinship based on the mother's ethnicity. Within this system, women play a strategic role. One of the community groups that adhere to the largest matrilineal in the world is the Minangkabau tribe in West Sumatra. Among the tribes that still practice the matrilineal system are: *Garo* (India), *Mosuo* (China), *Hopi* 

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(Arizona), *Iroquois* (North America), *Ovambo* (Africa) and *Akan* (Ghana). Matrilineal as a family institution has been widely studied by anthropologists, sociologists and custom law (1–4) from all over decades. Also, the image of a strong, independent, compassionate and wise Minangkabau woman is picturing by internal point of view by stories/*kaba* such as *Cindua Mato* and contemporary literary works such as the Novel *Negeri Perempuan* by Wisran Hadi (5).

In modern Minangkabau society, women residing in both urban and rural areas encounter various challenges. Despite their elevated status within the matrilineal society, many women venture outside their Nagari, a practice known as "merantau." Several motivations drive Minang people to embark on this merantau journey, including the pursuit of better economic prospects and the desire to further their education (6–8).

Originally, the term "rantau" referred to areas outside one's Nagari of origin, but it has since evolved to encompass regions overseas, spanning coastal areas from the west coast of Aceh to Bengkulu, as well as downstream regions like Riau and Jambi, extending to Nagari Sambilan in Malaysia. Minangkabau people can adapt with other ethnic groups in rantau area (9). In contemporary times, many Minangkabau women residing in cities outside West Sumatra and even abroad are referred to as "merantau." This shift in lifestyle leads them to abandon traditional roles by women such as working in the fields and managing their family's wealth in favor of pursuing careers in the public sphere.

In West Sumatra Province, where the Minangkabau community resides, women are actively engaged in a wide array of sectors, including trade, agriculture, home-based industries, services, and the private sector, encompassing banking, companies, and industry. This diversity in women's employment is closely tied to factors such as their level of education, family background, and place of residence (10). It's customary for women to participate in the workforce within a matrilineal society, where they contribute not only to their families but also to the broader community's prosperity.

Nevertheless, this dual role of women, being active in the public and private sphere, also presents a range of challenges. For instance, divorce can lead to women assuming the role of household heads and facing significant struggles in their lives. This shift in the cultural position of women among the Minangkabau can be attributed to changes in matrilineal kinship dynamics. Right now, the greater emphasis are on nuclear family roles, as well as the neo-local residence system which separates women from their matrilineal relatives (11).

Minangkabau women face struggles and hardships, but they possess a strong resilience. Resilience, in this context, refers to their ability to persevere when dealing



with crises that involve conflicts between their roles within the household and societal norms (12). A gender-focused perspective on resilience requires acknowledging the reality of differences and unequal roles within households. These gender dynamics revolve around financial matters, access to resources, and decision-making power, as well as leadership.

Resilience can flourish when women have equitable access to physical, social, cultural, and other resources. It's important to recognize and appreciate women's resilience, but at the same time, it shouldn't be overly romanticized. This perspective is reinforced through policies and programs that promote equal rights, active participation, and leadership opportunities in various aspects of life.

Furthermore, in different societal contexts, there is a prevailing assumption that men are primarily responsible for providing for their families. In Indonesia, this expectation is enshrined in Marriage Law No.1/1974. However, in actual practice, women frequently take on the role of breadwinners and are also responsible for childcare. The dual roles of women, encompassing both productive and reproductive responsibilities, become more pronounced during times of crisis (13).

In Minangkabau society, married men act as *mamak*. *Mamak* is responsible for various matters such as: traditional ceremonies, inheritance, problems within the tribe and so on. While in the economic field, ideally it is not borne by *mamak*. A children in Minangkabau society is financed with livelihood assets, while a nephew is financed with inheritance. This can also happen if the inheritance is still intact. However, various problems of domestic life in the Minang community can actually be the other way around. Women often have to work and fulfill household needs, at the same time dealing with the reality of divorce, being single parents and fulfilling their responsibilities in taking care of children.

Stereotypes in society still separate between public and private roles. Private affairs in the household are addressed to women and public space to men (14). The fact is that the distinction between the private and the public is not very meaningful because men and women live in both spaces. Feminist thinkers see that the private also includes the political (15). This concept has been implemented by Minangkabau women where they see there is no distinction between these two domains, especially in marriages between ethnic Minang and other ethnic groups (16).

Previous studies have seen the advantages of the matrilineal kinship system. Among them are the benefits of the matrilineal system in providing social protection to families (17), many also noted the experiences of women who migrated and the challenges they faced (18). However, not many studies have looked at how women's resilience deals with



the complexities of modern society, specifically the recent cases when facing covid-19. The life of minangkabau woman in modern society is facing a problems that make them able to survive in the midst of the role they carry as a mother. Minangkabau women, like other women in other parts of the world, face gender problems which are in the tension between roles in the public sphere and responsibilities for managing private households.

This article wants to prove that the spirit of the matrilineal kinship system is reflected in the woman as a subject. The question in this research is: how is the resilience of women in Minangkabau dealing with the challenges of modern life? What are the values applied in the matrilineal system so that women can divide their roles between their public and private lives?

This research wants to sees that although in the structure of Minangkabau society, men still hold power through the role of *mamak*, women are very strong in various fields when dealing with the complexities of modern society. Her firmness is at the same time his gentleness, which is reflected through the symbol of *Bundo Kanduang*. through the case of working women and single parents. These two cases prove that in a matrilineal society, women's self-restraint becomes an important part and is internalized within Minangkabau women.

## 2. Research Method

The research was conducted in West Sumatra, the heart of Minangkabau culture, which adhered to the matrilineal system. The study took place in Padang, West Sumatra, and Padang Pariaman Regency, representing urban and rural settings, respectively. These locations were chosen because both can represent cases of women grappling with complex social issues. The research participants were two women who had experienced structural oppression within Minangkabau society, specifically divorced women who were juggling work and childcare responsibilities.

The methodology employed in this study was qualitative, a commonly used approach in socio-cultural anthropological research. Additionally, the study utilized descriptive analysis to depict and uncover social realities in people's lives through case studies of working women and single parents. Moreover, feminist analysis was incorporated, using narrative stories to comprehend societal processes (19). This research was carried out in 2021, a period during which women were also contending with the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.



## 3. Result

Various problems faced by Minangkabau women who live in urban areas are related to the economy and their responsibilities in the household. Women who work due to economic demands have to divide their roles between working and raising children. These women indirectly find their strength when experiencing a crisis that is influenced by power relations and social roles assigned to them in a particular context, but on the other hand they are not passive or feel powerless.

Parenting at the same time dealing with poverty requires strengths and strategies that tend to be underappreciated in society. Inequality experienced by women caused by cultural construction can exacerbate their vulnerability. This in the long term can have an impact on the stability of life and happiness.

One of the respondents, Ms. M (30 years old) from Padang Pariaman Regency, has been divorced from her husband, Mr. SR since 2015. Her marriage has produced 2 children who are still studying at the junior high and high school levels. The reason for their divorce stemmed from Mr. SR's infidelity and involvement in domestic violence, issues that remain prevalent but often hidden within West Sumatra due to concerns about family reputation (20). After the divorce, Mr. SR never again provided a living for his son. This makes Ms. M have to work by doing small scale business at her house while taking care of her children.

In Minangkabau society, when there is a divorce, it is the mother's responsibility to takes care of their children. In the case above, the mother's family helped to take care of her grandson when her daughter was divorced by her husband. Luckily, there is a relative of Ms. M who works as a civil servant who helps pay Ms. M's children school fees. Even in educating her children, Ms. M has various limitations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, which required their children to study online Ms. M had to manage the use her cellphone and it was used by her two children in turns.

It's different with Mrs. WN who has been divorced and has been a single parent for 10 years. Mrs. WN has 3 children and works selling in the Padang market. WN's mother managed to send her children to university level and at this time some are already working. This shows the extraordinary tenacity and fighting power faced by Mrs. WN when she has to sell to meet the needs of her child's life. She admits that she will do any work so that her child can get a higher education. Although there are obstacles he faces, such as: unfair competition in his work and physical factors that have decreased, these are considered normal and not a barrier factor. The income earned by Mrs. WN is used to meet family needs, such as: paying for daily food, school fees or children's



educational costs, medical expenses for family members, as well as costs for social activities carried out by the community.

Mrs. WN comes from Agam Regency and has been residing in Padang since her marriage. In Minang tradition, this is referred to as being *rantau* dekat (near *rantau*), which means that women move away but maintain a strong cultural connection to their original *nagari* (village). Mrs. WN stated that, in her *nagari*, even though she has inherited land, she no longer understands how it is managed by her clan. This land is recognized as "harato pusako tinggi" within the matrilineal system. Unfortunately, Mrs. WN has no other option but to remain in the *rantau* rather than returning to her *nagari* because the difficulty that she must face when she's returning to *nagari*.

Single mothers encounter numerous challenges, and this holds true for Minang women as well. Interestingly, Minang women who become widowed, whether due to divorce or the passing of a spouse, often opt not to remarry. In cases where they already have children, they choose to embrace single parenthood as they aspire to excel in their children's education. This determination is underscored by the remarkable achievement of many single parents in the Minang society who manage to send their children to university, despite the formidable obstacles they confront along the way.

In a matrilineal system, children have a stronger connection to their mother's side of the family. When a woman becomes a single parent, it's common for her mother's family to step in and assist with child-rearing responsibilities, such as covering school expenses and helping the child become self-sufficient in life. This is a notable advantage of the matrilineal system, where *saparuik* family members like grandmothers and maternal aunts play a role in the child's upbringing (21).

The challenges faced by single-parent women can be intertwined with other life events and may persist for an extended period if not addressed effectively (22). These difficulties can lead to feelings of depression, which can have long-term repercussions on the well-being of their children.

# 4. Discussion and Analysis

The Minangkabau ethnic group, residing predominantly in West Sumatra, Indonesia, is recognised as the most extensive matrilineal civilization globally, with over 8.5 million individuals. The cultural practises of the Minangkabau community are founded around the guiding principle of "adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah," denoting the adherence to customary norms that are rooted in Islamic jurisprudence, with the latter being derived from the teachings of the Quran. This idea exemplifies the amalgamation



of indigenous customs with Islamic principles among the Minangkabau community. The Minangkabau culture is characterised by the prominent involvement of women in diverse domains of life, including but not limited to family, inheritance, property, education, and social affairs. Women are traditionally regarded as the guardians of the clan (suku) and the proprietors of the ancestral house (rumah gadang). Additionally, they possess the jurisdiction to oversee the management of the clan's resources and to designate individuals as leaders within the clan. In contrast, it is commonly anticipated that males will undertake migration, known as "merantau," in order to pursue educational opportunities, job advancement, and financial prosperity beyond their own region. The act of merantau has played a significant role in the dissemination of Minangkabau culture and influence throughout Indonesia and other regions.

The value system of Minangkabau women serves as both a cultural identifier and a source of resilience and empowerment when confronted with diverse obstacles, particularly those stemming from natural disasters. The region of West Sumatra exhibits a susceptibility to several natural hazards, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, floods, and tsunamis, which have historically resulted in substantial losses and damages. The Minangkabau women have demonstrated exceptional capabilities and tactics in managing these calamities throughout several phases, namely, predisaster, during the event, and post-disaster. Several of these tactics are derived from the indigenous community's extensive local knowledge and wisdom, which have been transmitted across centuries.

Prior to a calamitous event, the Minangkabau women engage in proactive measures to fortify their social networks and foster a sense of solidarity within their clan and neighbouring communities. Additionally, they engage in a diverse range of activities aimed at augmenting their aptitude and understanding, encompassing pursuits such as agriculture, commerce, craftsmanship, education, healthcare, and disaster mitigation. In addition, they engage in customary rituals aimed at averting or alleviating calamities, including the act of offering prayers and sacrifices to ancestral figures and nature deities.

In times of calamity, the Minangkabau women assume the roles of leaders and coordinators within their own communities. They effectively utilise their available resources and establish networks in order to offer aid and support to individuals need assistance. Furthermore, they fulfil the role of mediators and negotiators in the resolution of conflicts and disputes that may emerge as a consequence of stress and scarcity.

Following a tragedy, the Minangkabau women assume a crucial role in facilitating the recovery and reconstruction efforts. The individuals in question evaluate the requirements and preferences of their respective groups and actively promote the protection



of their rights and representation of their interests. Additionally, they engage in the initiation and active involvement of several projects with the objective of reinstating their means of subsistence, infrastructure, environment, culture, and social unity. In addition, they engage in the preservation and transmission of their cultural legacy and values to subsequent generations.

The value system of Minangkabau women constitutes a cultural contribution towards the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a particular emphasis on SDG 5, which pertains to achieving gender equality. The Minangkabau women have exhibited a notable departure from the perception of being passive recipients or reliant individuals, instead assuming proactive roles as agents and equitable collaborators in the process of development. Moreover, they have demonstrated their ability to effectively manage their various responsibilities encompassing motherhood, spousal duties, filial obligations, sibling relationships, leadership positions, entrepreneurial endeavours, educational pursuits, advocacy work, and numerous other tasks. It has been demonstrated that they possess the ability to maintain their traditional practises while simultaneously embracing modernity.

The value system of Minangkabau women serves as a distinctive illustration of how culture may serve as a catalyst for the empowerment of women and the promotion of sustainable development. The recognition and appreciation of women's uniqueness and potential in various circumstances provide a challenge for cultures outside their own. The value system of Minangkabau women is not only a significant cultural heritage for Indonesia, but also a valuable asset for humanity on a worldwide scale.

Although, the saparuik family is the intermediate tier within the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system, encompassing four successive generations: ninik (great-grandmother), nenek (grandmother), ibu (mother), and anak (child). The saparuik family is commonly referred to as the "one grandmother" family due to the fact that all its members trace their lineage back to a shared grandmother on the maternal side. The Saparuik family cohabitates in a spacious common dwelling known as Rumah Gadang, which is possessed and passed down through matrilineal inheritance. In contrast, it is customary for males to depart from their place of birth and pursue opportunities for wealth and education abroad, a cultural phenomenon commonly referred to as merantau. The male individuals sporadically revisit their place of birth or alone during significant ceremonial events.

The *saparuik* family assumes a significant role in fostering resilience among the Minangkabau community, particularly among its female members. Resilience refers to an individual's capacity to effectively manage and surmount a diverse range of obstacles



and adversities encountered during their lifetime. The *saparuik* family plays a crucial role in offering social support, ensuring economic stability, fostering cultural identity, and providing moral guidance to its members. The *Saparuik* family additionally cultivates a collective consciousness, collaborative spirit, and reciprocal support within its members. The *Saparuik* family is subject to a system of customary regulations known as *adat*, which derive its foundation from Islamic concepts and indigenous knowledge. The *adat* system encompasses a wide range of societal domains, including inheritance, marriage, divorce, property ownership, education, and conflict resolution.

The *Saparuik* family also plays a significant role in the advancement of Minangkabau society and culture. The *Saparuik* family serves as the origin of diverse traditions, values, arts, and abilities that are transmitted intergenerationally. The *Saparuik* family also promotes and supports the pursuit of education and knowledge, encompassing both religious and secular domains. The *Saparuik* family has been known for producing numerous notable individuals across diverse domains, including politics, religion, education, business, arts, and literature.

Nevertheless, the *Saparuik* family encounters several problems and undergoes transformations in the contemporary day. Several issues can be attributed to several factors such as globalisation, urbanisation, migration, education, economy, technology, and gender roles. The aforementioned issues have the potential to impact the long-term viability and durability of the *saparuik* family system and its associated values. For instance, certain individuals from the younger generation may have a preference for residing in nuclear family structures as opposed to traditional *rumah gadang* dwellings. Certain women may opt to engage in employment outside of their residence, as opposed to assuming responsibility for domestic matters. Certain individuals of the male gender may express a desire for increased participation and control inside their familial abode, as opposed to adhering strictly to the customary norms and regulations. The legality and relevance of adat laws in the present setting may be subject to questioning or challenge by some individuals.

Hence, it is imperative to examine the manner in which the *saparuik* family effectively adjusts to these obstacles and transformations, all the while upholding its resilience and sense of identity. It is imperative to investigate the strategies employed by the *saparuik* family in fostering empowerment among its members, particularly the female members, in order to effectively navigate and surmount the aforementioned obstacles and transformations. An additional aspect of significance is in the investigation of the methods employed by the *saparuik* family to uphold and transfer their values and traditions to succeeding cohorts. By doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding



of the unique value system embraced by the Minangkabau women and their role in contributing to local sustainable development.

## 5. Conclusion

Minangkabau women occupy a unique position within the matrilineal system, yet they still grapple with male-dominated formal power structures in customs, religion, and public roles. Women's challenges are evident, especially among those who are single parents and working to support their families. In this context, resilience signifies the inner strength of women as they navigate their roles as homemakers and breadwinners while ensuring the well-being of their children.

The research reveals that Minangkabau women, particularly widows, exhibit resilience when confronted with modern challenges, showcasing their success in providing their children with a formal education. This achievement is closely tied to the supportive role of the saparuik family within the matrilineal kinship system. The resilience of Minangkabau women plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development goals, marking a significant contribution to their communities.

On the other side, the resilience of women as a working mother and/or widow also indicates that the role of men has become marginalized in modern Minang society. Responsibilities that should be a shared obligation between men and women become as if they were borne by women alone and men can be separated from the responsibility of raising children. This certainly goes against the spirit of feminism where responsibility must be shared within the family.

## **Declaration of Conflict Interest**

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

# **Biography**

**Fatmariza** serves as a faculty member in the Pancasila and Civic Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Padang. She holds the position of Research Centre for Gender and Development's director. She earned her master degrees from Gender Studies (1999) and the doctor of sociology from University of Indonesia (2012). Her scholarly pursuits encompass a focus on gender-related studies, and women's empowerment,



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**Rika Febriani** holds a teaching position within the Department of Social and Political Studies and actively engages in research as a member of the Research Centre for Gender and Development at Universitas Negeri Padang. She earned her master degrees from Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Driyarkara (2016) and the bachelor degree from University of Indonesia (2007). Her academic interests encompass a range of topics including feminism, gender studies, ethics, pluralism, moral education, development, and the impacts of globalization.

**Sakinah Salleh** is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities, Sultan Idris University of Education, Perak, Malaysia. Having her PhD in Education (Specialization in Psychology and Counseling) from International Islamic University Malaysia. Her academic expertise are counseling and education. She has involved in conducting many research in the field of counselling, education and family. She has also written many books, articles and presented scientific writings in the fields of psychology, counseling, motivation, education, family, and philosophy.

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