From Gender Differences and Injustice to Gender Equality and Justice (Gender in Christian Perspective)

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Abstract: This paper tries to analyze how the problems between men and women, which include status, rights, position and roles, relate to religion view. This paper also explains how far culture has given a strong color in religion interpretation and how the result will be if the textual study is done in the approach of gender equality that lifting up women’s degree of humanity.

Practically, religions are expected to monitor and evaluate program as well as develop policy and action that are not biased. If there is interpretation of the verses of religions that the validity is doubt and that it hampers gender equality, this unfair interpretation needs to be clarified. Various methods and approaches of the renewal of study of women in religions can be used for this purpose. The thing to strive for is how to restore women’s humanity that they can grow into wholly human beings.

Keywords: Gender, Equality, Justice, Christian Perspective

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, gender problems have become interesting issues of discussion, both in the global and national scope. Various problems faced by women and men are analyzed through various approaches in order to find the root of the problems. The problems rooted in religions are the most important things since human lives generally are strongly influenced by religions and cultures. These two factors influence each other that there are times when it cannot be differed which one influences what or which has more dominant influence.

Therefore, in order to see the root of the problems, textual study of a religion about men and women position and its
reality in the society is needed. Some centuries ago, human being did not realize what came upon human gender. Now, through the study of history, what happened to the two genders in the past can be traced. From the history, it can also be noted that human had once been an offerings to the goddess. In the past, that was not a problem, it was indeed regarded as sacred. Holy women were used to be chosen for the offerings. Women’s holiness is the standard of their self esteem. (AP Murniati:1992) Women self esteem is determined by their husbands. The example is when the husband dies, the wife must be burnt along with her husband. Thus, the wife’s fate is determined by the husband’s fate. This is reflected in a Javanese proverb, swargo nunut, nera ka katut (it is the husband who determines the wives fate, as they follow wherever the husband goes, whether to heaven or hell) (AP Murniati:1992).

Human lives have been through a phase when they are the object, are inherited and traded. Human souls are even determined by their family or society. Violence in the name of religion is also experienced by women in a long period of time in the history of human being without any shame or regret from the actors. Nowadays, violence and persecution is still taking place in a more sophisticated form.

This paper tries to analyze how the problems between men and women, which include status, rights, position and roles, relate to religion view. This paper also explains how far culture has given a strong color in religion interpretation and how the result will be if the textual study is done in the approach of gender equality that lifting up women’s degree of humanity.

2. The Position of Men and Women: Biology Factor, Culture Domination and the Influence toward Religion

2.1 Biology Factor

From the beginning, women face and encounter the world around them with the typical body of women. Their body is at the same time their limitation and possible servitude. The
demand of socialization and chance provided for them in a
stage in the history, their individual experience in interacting
with the applied social cultural values or myths about
women, along with their interaction with meaningful people
and their choices in facing various chances or obstacles will
turn them from creatures born as women into unique
women.

Women’s everyday behaviors are often related to their
physical aspects (in our culture, their physical aspects are
directly or indirectly interpreted popularly as women and
their nature). The problems of women’s physical aspects
have stimulated the writer to systematically show how
women’s physical aspects influence their behavior
development. In other words, the different body feature
between men and women is an influential variable toward
the behavior of each gender (Tiffany, Sharon W: 1982)

Biological difference between the two genders is neither
mediator variable nor behavior development that is typically
women or men. The influential factor in women’s or men’s
identity development is the way the social environment
reacts to someone in relation to his/her biological reality,
that is, whether the person is female or male. Therefore, the
determining factor is psychological factor, not mainly
biological factor.

The reality does not indicate that physically women
experience particular things. The typical conditions of
women’s biological aspect is that only women who experience
menstruation cycle, pregnancy and giving birth,
breastfeeding and menopause. There is a myth related to
this biological fact saying that women are mother natures.

2.2 Socialization and Sexual Role

Socialization role develops human characteristics
expected by the social environment ever since their early age.
Historically, socialization of roles determined for women and
men (sexual role) is rooted in the job description between
men and women to fulfill their biological, economic and
social needs.
Study on the socialization process in 110 illiterate cultural environments reveals that the differences in roles are clearly taught only after a girl enters her teenage age. She is asked to take care of her younger brother/sister, obey her parents and be responsible. In the same age, men are taught to be independent and be able to make a living. It especially applies in cultural environment where men have to hunt and make a living using physical power; whereas women stay at home to give birth, nurture and take care of her family.

In an industrialization cultural environment, where physical power to go on a battle or work is important, the foundation of men and women personality model seen as restrictions for one’s potential. In industrialized society, the tendency is that sexual job description is no longer clear with rigid boundaries.

Because of the unclear sexual job description of men or women, children socialization on their sexual job description will also get the impact. The unclear boundaries of the job description between women and men do not mean that parents do not have to differentiate between boys and girls in nurturing their children.

2.3 Domination of Culture

Human civilization develops in patriarchal culture and ideology. In western countries, US and west Europe, this culture has been wiped out by the development of technology-democracy, etc, that places equality and justice as their central values. In the Third World countries, including Indonesia, patriarchal culture and ideology are very strong and are present in all aspects of life and society structure that it results in gender disparity. Desecularization in nurturing children will create various internal and external conflicts if it is not followed by grounded projection and insight about the meaning of the roles of social changes applied in the environment. The conflict emerges if the result of the ongoing socialization process in the family can not be
applied in the wider social environment because of the very different value system.

Literally, patriarchal means the power of a father that at the beginning develops in a family under the father protection, as what can be found in extended family or groups in society where men are the leaders. Men have central position where the whole lives and activities of the groups are determined by the male leader. Men are seen as the appropriate person to lead. Based on that condition, the discharging of women's rights in various complex societies begins to take place. Aware or not, this stream of culture will be stronger and at the end it will be its culture and ideology. Next, in a long process, through the culture, subordination toward women unites in the society.

In traditional society, patriarchal is seen as a thing that is not to be disputed because it is always linked with the nature of the undeniable supernatural power. According to them, God has determined the differences between men and women that human lives are governed by the differences. It means that because women and men are different biologically, their social functions and jobs are designed differently. Men are always related to function and task outside the house, whereas women, with their nature to give birth, need to stay in the house. The main duty of women is to raise children and the main duty of men is to find a living. The differences are seen as natural things. Therefore the disparity that leads to subordination toward women is seen as a natural thing as well. It does not only happen in a family but it has developed in the life of society.

2.4 Issues on the difference and injustice of Gender in Indonesian Context

Culture and ideology do not suddenly come from heaven. They are formed by human and socialized from one generation to the following generations. Cultural values are mental factors that determine someone or society differences. In our culture, as found in other third world countries, patriarchal culture is still very strong. In the lives of social politics, economy, and moreover culture, the
asymmetric and subordinate disparity over women is very clear. In this condition, the process of marginalization toward women takes place, and in turn women have to lose the autonomy over themselves. Exploitation and violence toward women both in domestic or public area take place. Even though, formally, in UUD 1945 (the highest law in Indonesia), women and men are not differentiated, the reality seems to be very different. It was also the case when Orde Baru claimed to have brought Indonesia to development progress, subordination and marginalization toward women never decreases. It is obvious in the male bias political policies.

In politics, women are exploited. It is obvious in legislative sector. The 1997 election with 57% women voters, they only get not more than 12% representatives, similar to the election on the last June, 1999. Worse than previous election, women get only 6.7% representatives in June 1999. The recruitment of legislative members conducted by political parties seems not to trust women to sit in legislative institutions. This disbelief rooted in the view that politics is public area related to the Nation’s power. Usually public area and power concept are associated to men. Therefore, women in politics is regarded as anomaly. Socialization in family as well as outside the family that separate public and private area has strengthened the view. This condition will obviously influence the making of political policy that then lead to male bias policy.

In history, the number of women sitting in executive institutions is not more than two people, they are the Minister of Women affairs and the Social Minister. There were only two women in Gus Dur’s era. They were the Minister of Women Empowerment and the Minister of Settlement. Only after that, we have a female president. In the lowest government structure, that is in villages, in Java, some women as the village leaders begin to emerge. This is because of their hard works since they have to prove their abilities and they have to face the culture that are still reluctant in accepting women as the leaders of the village.
Women also experience discrimination in law. The examples are the case of Marsinah, the rape of Chinese minority in May 1998 as well as the rape and violence toward women in Aceh, East Timor and Irian. Even until now, the government has not managed to reveal who the actors are. There are some other cases, not to mention various unrevealed sexual abuses in order to keep the self esteem of government officials. However, there is no warning toward the government from women who are in the legislative institutions.

In economy, economy crisis has marginalized women with various government policies referred more to men because they are the bread winners. The example of this case is the government program to facilitate those who do not have jobs (program padat karya) that involves only men. Another example is that in statistics, we do not see any income earned by women’s jobs such as sewing, catering or other jobs in informal sectors listed. So far, the income data is always taken from the husband’s income, both from the formal or informal jobs, as they are the head of the family. This is not fair for women as there are also some of them who earn money from the informal sectors (Boserup: 1970).

Sexual inequality in family also presents in pregnancy planning. Often, it is the husband who decides whether to accept or to reject family planning program (Keluarga Berencana-KB) by ‘giving permission’ to the wife to be an acceptor. Wives rarely reject sexual intercourse with the husbands because their religious doctrine tells them that it is a sin if they reject to do sexual intercourse with the husbands. In Javanese culture, for example, some values that subordinate women such as konco wingking (wives are only to do kitchen jobs) or swarga nunut neraka katut (it is the husband who determines the wives fate, as they follow wherever the husband goes, whether to heaven or hell). The proverb means that the wives cannot exceed the husbands and that women are helpless and they have no power over themselves (Bhasin: 1984).

Education, which is a very important process for the growth of one’s reasoning, is still governed by the patriarchal
rule. A family, for example, will prioritize the sons because they are the successors of the family, whereas daughters will be taken over by other family. The socializations and norms placing men in a higher position from women will later determine the personality and attitude of women who tend to be not open and tend to have low self confidence.

3. Heading to Gender Equality and Justice

Whether in the era of parliamentary democracy, guided democracy or Pancasila, women’s position does not change a lot even though women’s involvement in politics has begun even from the colonial era in accordance to the emergence of nationality movement. In the era of parliamentary democracy, organization had the right to move even though it is under a certain political party. Under guided democracy, women political organizations were less powerful by the reducing of the numbers of political parties. However, women organizations outside political parties were allowed to develop. In the New Order era where power was centralized and authoritarian, parties lost their independence because they were co-opted into the Nation’s network of power. The condition resulted in the more narrow scope of women organization because they were also included in the Nation’s network. Women organizations outside Nation’s power were seen as suspicious organizations. Military domination in the New Order era plunged women’s position in the society. Military force did not give attention to women problems because the basic characteristics of military that relates women with private and domestics affairs.

The dichotomy of public and private places women outside Nation’s political activities, even though there may be some women political movement, but it can be assured that the numbers are only few. Society structure that puts women in the discriminative subordinate position is also based on the condition that most of our elites do not have gender sensitivity.

The explanation above describes the injustice for women in political affairs that impact all aspect of life. The ongoing reformation does not only fight against oppression,
authoritarianism, injustice and etc. that is non democratic, this is what we see as a transitional process toward democracy. Now, this is a chance for women to actualize themselves over many forms of subordination and marginalization that are not supposed to be embedded any longer in women (Blackburn: 1992).

Reformation, which is the transition toward democracy, has opened the chance for women to change personal issues into political ones. This political change is important for women movement to start diminishing patriarchal views that disadvantage women. Patriarchal ideology has created injustice in many sectors. Without equality and justice for all people, democracy that we fight for is not democracy but pseudo democracy (Blackburn: 1992)

4. How the Bible writes about women’s role

In the Bible there is no particular writing saying that the assigned roles of women is only in domestic sectors. Women involvement in public area had been told in the Old Testament even though they were only wives.

In the book of Genesis, the word “equal” does not mean that men have to be women or women have to be men. Women and men stand alone, with different profile and body structure, with their unique characteristics, but both are precious in God’s sight.

In Genesis 2 verse 18, God Himself said that human solitary life was not good. He intended to create “a helper who is equal with him” (according to TB-LAI; BIS: “a suitable friend to help him). However, seeing women as only a “servant” does not seem to be appropriate, “Equal” means “opposite” or “contrary to him”. Therefore, the text does not mean that the creation of women/wives as “suitable servants” for men or their husbands, but as “equal helpers”(Emarth, Margareth Sittler:1970).

The following verses mention human as the image of God. This context wants to explain the presence of the image of God as men and women. Further, it is explained that human
are created in God’s image that they rule over other creatures. It means that human are created not to be superior over other creatures. Human are created through God’s comprehensive consideration (Emarth, Margareth Sittler:1970).

In the New Testament, it is interesting to pay attention to what Paul says in Corinthians, “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” (Emswiler, S.N:1977).

The meaning of the verses above is that women do not stand alone, separated from men and men do not stand alone, separated from women”. The problem is not in whether or not they stand alone but in the matter of equality (George Harkness; 1972 ; Emarth, Margareth Sittler:1970).

Therefore, in what Paul says we can see five things.

1. In the comprehension of faith life, there is no one without the other.
2. According to the general comprehension he possessed, Paul believes that women are from men.
3. Paul sees in the very concrete natural reality that is undeniable that men are born by women and not the other way around. Tradition can emphasize that women are from men, but the reality is that men cannot give birth but women can.
4. The important thing is not who is from who but in the fact that MEN AND WOMEN ARE FROM “ALL THINGS”, INCLUDING THAT BOTH MEN AND WOMEN ARE FROM GOD (VERSE 12). IT MEANS BOTH ARE CREATIONS, BOTH ARE BEINGS.
5. Men and women together play a role in all aspects of life. The example is as social workers: help oppressed and poor people (Proverb 31:20).

For public roles similar to the list above, particular expertise and skill are needed, thus, it is reasonable that women learn some expertise and skill in various fields and sectors. However, because of gender roles, women expertise
and skill are limited or made narrow to household and family domestic affairs. This condition is no longer suitable if the area is widened to the public area. There are many biases in skill/expertise regarded as women’s job that are automatically acknowledged in the public area.

Therefore, we are not to obey blindly what is in the Bible texts without putting it in our situation and condition. The texts are intended for us to understand the past situation and condition of our predecessor that when we apply God’s words we need to consider the meaning we acquire from the situation and condition of our predecessors (Emswiler, S.N:1977).

In the sociological interpretation, in the New Testament Era, women are not to appear in the public area, including play a role in a sermon. However, it does not mean that women do not have an important role. In addition to their role as mothers, women are also active in other aspects of life, such as being merchants in markets and decision makers in various conditions. May be through this approach, the negative impression toward the New Testament texts above, 1Timothy 2:8-15, can be resolved. (Emswiler, S.N:1977)

6. Conclusion

In discussing about gender, we need to revisit the concept of gender as social construction. Women and men have different roles, have unequal access to resources and have different influence of policy and values in their lives. If there is no sensitivity toward the things mentioned above, the inequality will be ongoing and even strengthened. This is because of the society’s misleading perception about gender roles that is influenced by various forms of stereotyping, habits and traditional concepts. In this case, religions, especially Moslem and Christian, are expected to be the pioneer in encouraging paradigm changes, dispelling stereotyping, and improving the understanding of gender equality.
Therefore, we need to understand the verses of the bible correctly. In Christianity, it is the time to start to understand the verses in the Holy bible as biblical foundation carefully. We see that the unlucky position of women in verse two is caused by the sinful nature. It means that the text does not intend to reveal such description.

Practically, religions are expected to monitor and evaluate program as well as develop policy and action that are not biased. If there is interpretation of the verses of religions that the validity is doubt and that it hampers gender equality, this unfair interpretation needs to be clarified. Various methods and approaches of the renewal of study of women in religions can be used for this purpose. The thing to strive for is how to restore women’s humanity that they can grow into wholly human beings.

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