

Reframing domestic roles: Language and gender equality in rural communities

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Abstract

Traditional gender roles are deeply rooted and often reinforced through everyday language, particularly in rural communities in Indonesia. Word choice and phrases such as "husband helping the wife washing the dishes" or "husband helping wife with childcare" imply that children and domestic work are primarily the responsibility of the wife alone, accidentally perpetuating gender inequality. By involving interactive workshops and discussions with both men and women to raise awareness about the impact of language on gender roles in Kendalrejo village-Pemalang Regency, Central Java, this article examines how altering word choice can influence perceptions of gender roles and promote equality in domestic work. Purposive sampling was carried out to ensure diverse representation, and 10 participants were chosen and joined the research intervention using the framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR). The finding of this research portrays a significant shift in perception with increased recognition of men's role in domestic work for both women and men. This is a part of mainstreaming gender equality by underscoring the importance of word choice in shaping social norms as well as offering a practical approach in rural settings.

Keywords: domestic work; gender equality; rural communities; word choice

INTRODUCTION

Language is a weapon. As a weapon, language holds the possibility for excessive conformity or acquiescence. It possesses a predominating function in imposing on individuals to cause accidents. Therefore, language expressions such as "the father *helps* the mother feed the baby" or "the husband *helps* the wife do house chores" have proliferated in household communication as a common language. These, involuntarily, have constructed role dichotomy between men and women, resulting in gender equality diminution and disidentification. As Coates (2015) rightly points out, that language is a tool for identity development. This notion also seems to apply to the context of gender identity and equality. Gender identity, which comprises men and women, is constantly developed through daily language practices. When used consistently in everyday conversations, certain words and phrases in a language have the potential to shape new beliefs and establish norms. Eventually, people will necessarily follow what the majority does in their community.



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Language has always been the primary concern in culture. Quite probably no one denies that in cultural study, the language that should be discussed is the daily language expression (Barker & Jane, 2016; Cavallaro, 2013; Storey, 2021). What remains to be resolved is which forms of language expression should be addressed. In this line of argument, “gender and language” is a fruitful site for exploring the dynamics underlying language choice, including such dimensions as dominance and mutual support. Tannen (1996) proposes that using conversation as an example to understand gender patterns in language use would be particularly significant for research on language and gender. Her approach highlights how conversational styles can reveal rooted societal dynamics and authority constructs often shaped by gender. These patterns provide insight into how individuals navigate relationships and assert identity through language.

Probably it is true that the elementary facet of language deals with the establishment of social relations and interaction, but what seems to be widely known is that language has been universally utilized as nothing but a means of communication, period. However, to the knowledge of the present writers, language is not merely an instrument of communication. As an instrument, language should be utilized to reflect and reinforce societal notions of gender. It is a truism that language could be employed as a weapon to uphold equality, cancel patriarchy, and strike down misogyny. In this regard, Chomsky (1989), who also seems to be concerned about the idea of language being misunderstood, highlights the social functions of language as follows: 1) language serves many purposes beyond merely conveying information, 2) language serves as a tool for individual expression and cognitive clarity, 3) language is used to articulate human thoughts, ideas, and emotions independently of the social environment, 4) language enable individuals to arrange and convey their internal ideas without regard for social settings or external feedback, 5) understanding the deep structures of language to make well-thought-out changes can influence how language is used and perceived in society. Such insightful perspectives by Chomsky, however, seem to be allied with language reform, particularly, as indicated by point number five concerning the language change. Mills (2008) puts forward that language reform is necessary to reconstruct socio-cultural beliefs. She has been convinced that certain language expressions have propagated a false image of gender identity.

Instead of the expressions “the father *feeds* the baby” or “the husband *cleans* the house”, the expressions “husband *helping* the wife doing the house chores” or “husband *helping* wife with childcare” are commonly used in daily conversation, mushrooming as common sense in rural communities. The later expressions imply that children and domestic work are primarily the women's responsibility alone, creating a hollow room to fill in with reasonable questions on language use and cultural belief. As such, the so-called common expressions are accidentally perpetuating gender inequality. Another point which is crucial relates to the construction of gender roles. Language and communication patterns are deeply embedded in cultural expectations regarding masculinity and femininity, influencing how men and women are perceived in various social contexts (Tannen, 1996), not excluded in rural communities.

Like language and culture, gender equality and belief cannot be comprehended discreetly. Important points posed by Butler (1999), which are controversial, relate to the notion that gender is not something we “are” but something we “do” suggesting that gender is not a fixed idiosyncrasy (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). For her, deconstructing the aforementioned belief would offer ways to rethink identity and expression beyond traditional norms. In rural communities, where traditional gender norms are often deeply ingrained in linguistic expressions, language reforms can promote a more fluid and

inclusive understanding of gender. Through the power of language, rural communities can create fairer ideas about gender, supporting Butler's theory that gender is made through actions and interactions, not an inborn trait.

On that account, exploring the pivotal role of language in shaping and perpetuating gender norms within rural communities is essential for understanding the dynamics of social structures and cultural practices. In addition, delving into how the choice of words and phrases in everyday communication can reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations. It is resonating the manifestation of the second sex reality from Simone De Beauvoir in Heraty (2018) that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". By examining the linguistic patterns prevalent in these communities, this article attempts to shed light on the subtle yet powerful ways language influences social attitudes and behaviors, emphasizing the potential for using inclusive and equitable language as a tool for challenging and transforming entrenched gender stereotypes, ultimately promoting greater gender equality and empowerment in rural areas.

Myriads of research projects have been devoted to addressing the issues of gender equality and women empowerment (Adolfsson & Madsen, 2020; Cislighi & Heise, 2020; Davis et al., 2024; Guthridge et al., 2022; Haryanti & Suwana, 2014; Kataeva et al., 2024; Pattenden, 2023; Samal & Dash, 2024; Shenbei et al., 2023; Suchana, 2024; Tadros & Shutt, 2024; Zuhriah et al., 2024). Despite the breadth of the sample literature, there is a noticeable absence of studies that explore how language can be leveraged to uphold gender equality and empower women, with an exception of that of (Davis et al., 2024). Svensson (2024) might bring up a little about the benefit of being literate for women to survive in society. However, she barely discussed the issue of language's impact on gender equality. Her analysis of language and literacy centers on the impact of gender on educational disparities. On the other hand, Davis et al. (2024) observe that gendered language has influenced belief through a cultural and cognitive approach. They further explain that in contexts where gender-related social norms are highly valued, cultural mechanisms indicate a greater likelihood of gender distinctions being mirrored in language.

Although quite a number of studies have addressed the issue of gender equality in rural communities, as noted above, they have not provided necessary documentation about the impacts of language expression and alteration on gender identity and equality in rural Indonesia. Taking the issue above as the point of departure, therefore, this study aims to investigate how alteration in language can impact perceptions of gender roles and encourage equality in domestic work in rural communities through the approach of community empowerment. The term "empowerment" will be the highlight process of this research, following Kabeer (2018, 2021), the engine of empowerment lies in these three aspects: resources, agency, and achievement. Resources become a precondition for the presence of community or women's empowerment, resources can be in the form of material resources, human resources, and social resources. While the agency is related to the ability of a person or group to determine and to act, thus it is related both to knowledge or understanding and motivation. Moreover, the achievement is the result formed from the two previous aspects. In essence, achievement is related to all life functions (*being* and *doing*) formed by resources and their agencies.

METHOD

The aim of this study is to explore practical strategies for promoting gender equality in rural settings by highlighting the pivotal role of language in shaping social norms and behaviors

in domestic work. This research was an integral part of community intervention initiated by the collaboration of the Yayasan Akar Cahaya Indonesia, The Pollination Project, and the Government of Pematang Regency called “Kartini Corner” in June to December 2023 in Kendalrejo village. The participants were those men and women around 100 people in total, who joined the sub-event of Kartini Corner, a workshop with the topic “*Pengasuhan Positif: Keterlibatan Ayah dalam Pengasuhan dan Pendidikan Anak*”.

By using purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation, 10 selected participants joined the research intervention utilizing the framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Following Chevalier & Buckles (2019) PAR involves meaningful engagement from participants to ensure their voice and experience (*participation*), focuses on creating social change as a research outcome, in this case, not only just producing the knowledge (*action*), and uses a systemic method to understand and address the social issue (*research*). They also illuminate PAR as the expressive medium for awareness building and the center of moral thinking, which is the heart of the objective of this study. In essence, PAR assists the research process by promoting collective reasoning and evidence-based learning (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013) toward questioning the existing norm in the form of language used that perpetuates the imbalance of domestic roles between men and women. This process of putting research *with* people rather than *on* or *for* people prevails the notion of new perspective from the participants since each of them critically reinterpret the common word choices used and its impact to sustain gender inequality. New norms may arise when information circulates about the advantages and disadvantages of previous behaviors or when individuals become aware of the perspectives and convictions held by their peers within their social network (Gelfand et al., 2023), and the further stage of PAR framework to fostering a change can begin in the form of collaboration.

Table 1. Participants Demography

Initial, Age	Sex	Education and occupation
TA,50	Male	SMA, Religious Figure
MD,36	Female	SD, Merchant
MF,48	Female	SMP, Religious Figure
DS, 37	Male	S1, Marchant
RJ, 46	Female	SD, Merchant
IM, 37	Male	S1, Merchant
LM, 36	Female	SMK, Housewife
SR, 35	Female	SD, Housewife
CM, 48	Female	SD, Merchant
SJ, 49	Male	SMA, Government Officer

The participants consisted of four males and six females with different backgrounds of education and socio-economic status, they then joined Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Moreover, data collected from workshop observation and FGD was analyzed using participatory analysis. Chevalier & Buckles (2019) emphasize participatory analysis by involving participants in the interpretation of the data to ensure their perspectives and

insights are accurately represented. This was also the highlight of participants' participation in this research process, where the researchers held a review session to present initial findings from workshop observation and FGDs to ensure that the analysis resonates with the perspective of all participants.

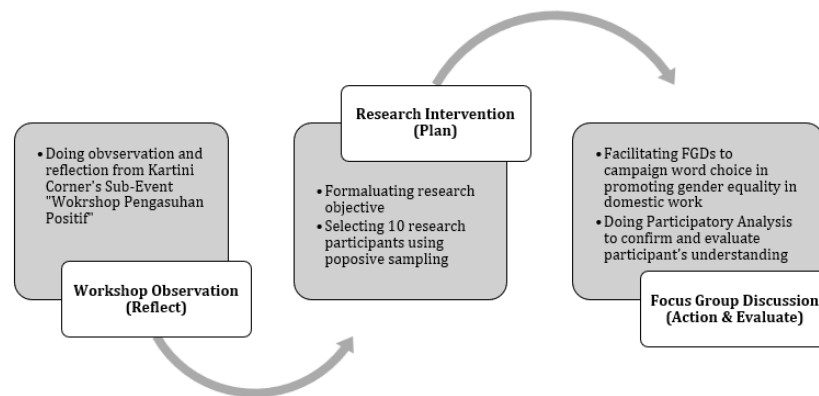


Figure 1. The flow of research implementation using [Kemmis & McTaggart](#) Cycle (1988)

In addition, the flow of this research employed [Kemmis & McTaggart](#) (1988) principle of action research (containing reflect, plan, action, and evaluate cycle), particularly in assisting the researchers to address research focus in unveiling the preliminarily notion of gender roles in domestic work, facilitating interactive workshop (using FGD) to raise awareness about the impact of language on gender roles as well as in tracking the shift of both perception and custom of participants.

Furthermore, all the data collected from workshop observations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant feedback were analyzed using a participatory approach. Following [Chevalier & Buckles](#) (2019), participatory analysis was conducted to ensure the authenticity of participants' perspectives. Data transcription and thematic coding were applied to identify recurring patterns and themes related to language and its influence on gender roles. This approach emphasized collaboration, where participants actively contributed to interpreting the data during review sessions. These sessions served as a validation process, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences and evolving perceptions. The participatory analysis also tracked shifts in both attitudes and practices concerning gender roles in domestic work, offering valuable insights into the impact of language on shaping social norms and behaviors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The gender norm landscape of domestic realm in Kendalrejo Village

Kendalrejo Village is geographically located on the north coast and faces many social and natural challenges. Under the administration of Pemalang Regency, this village is home to 8,729 residents; 4,361 of the total population are male and 4,428 are female ([Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023](#)). The majority of the population is Muslim. Based on the results of interviews with the village head, many women work as farmers, traders, and housewives. Pemalang Regency is ranked third after Boyolali and Temanggung Regencies with the best IDG (Gender Empowerment Index) in Central Java - in 2022 the figure reached 81.57% ([Dinas Perempuan dan Anak Provinsi Jawa Tengah, 2023](#)). Currently, Kendalrejo Village is led by a woman village head. However, the reality found during observations showed that the

proportion of women involved in public spaces was still small. In addition, the educational level of women there was dominated by elementary school graduates, followed by junior high school-high school graduates, and only a few were college graduates. This agony of veracity nourishes the patriarchal values injecting into the double burden for women, especially in domestic settings.

The reality was confirmed by 10 participants who joined the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in giving meaning to the pictures demonstrated in understanding their view about gender roles in household work and childcare. The first picture was a husband who bathes his toddler, and the second was a picture of a husband cooking in the kitchen. The male participants were asked about the meaning of the picture based on their interpretation, and how it conjoined with their role and participation in their daily activities. Of the four men, two of them saw domestic work as their obligation as a member of the household. And only one man who fully participated in the daily chores. As for the women participants, the majority of them understood that taking care of their home and child was their obligation, they only asked their spouse's participation to help them when they had their hands full. This gender norm created a double burden for women.

Table 2. Matrix of the awareness and participation of the men (males) in domestic work

Initial, Age, Sex, Education	Awareness of Men's Role	Participation of Men
TA, 59, M, SMA	The man is obligated to the role	Fully participated
MD, 36, F, SD	The man is obligated to help women in the role	Not participated
MF, 52, F, SMP	The man is obligated to the role	Fully participated
DS, 37, M, S1	The man is obligated to the role	Not fully participated
RJ, 46, F, SD	Only woman is obligated to the role	Not participated
IM, 37, M, SI	The man is obligated to help women in the role	Fully participated
LM, 36, F, SMK	Only woman is obligated to the role	Not participated
SR, 35, F, SD	The man is obligated to help women in the role	Not participated
CM, 48, F, SD	The man is obligated to help women in the role	Not fully participated
SJ, 49, M, SMA	The man is obligated to help women in the role	Not fully participated

Cracking the patriarchy: No one 'helps' when the responsibility is mutual

This was a reflection of the first workshop "*Pengasuhan Positif: Keterlibatan Ayah dalam Pengasuhan dan Pendidikan Anak*". The agenda was held in June 2023 with the participation of around 100 people consisting man and women from different backgrounds in Kendalrejo village and the surroundings. Following the topic, the event first focused on the role of a father in childcare and continued to do other domestic chores. The active participation from participants especially men was surprising. Facilitating by the male speaker Mr. M (image on the far left in Figure 2.), contributed to the engaging session. The critical note observation about the workshop and the nuanced interaction was as follows:

The flashcards: “mengganti” vs “membantu mengganti”

Despite the gender norm that saw domestic work as a women’s obligation, when they were exposed to “wording”, it invited their logical understanding of justice and equality to reinterpret their understanding of gender roles in the household. When Mr. M played the video about a father who put his child to bed and sang a lullaby, the immediate reaction of the audience was a noise similar to a pang of silliness. One random audience even roared from afar “Where is the mother?!”. Hence, Mr. K followed him by showing the slide of a PowerPoint containing a flashcard: two pictures of a man changing the baby’s diapers with different captions. The first one was “Ayah mengganti popok anaknya” (Father changed his child’s diaper). Second, “Ayah membantu ibu mengganti popok anaknya” (Dad helps mom change her child’s diaper). The random guy answered by pointing to the picture with the first caption, and so did other participants.

What we discovered here was not different from what [Davis et al. \(2024\)](#) uncovered in their research, in the discussion of how language use could shift paradigms. In their heart, husband and father as men did not deny that acting as husband or father who changed baby’s diaper did not violate their identity as men. This suggests that fair and square distribution of any family role is possible regardless of gender. The same settlement had also been agreed by the male participants in a research project conducted by [Davis et al. \(2024\)](#). They believed that certain grammatical genders in language had contributed to gendered violence. Thus, language reform is more than necessary to reconstruct sociocultural beliefs that have become the attributive element in constructing gender inequality.

The way domestic work is framed as a woman’s responsibility through language reinforces gender inequality by making it seem normal and expected for household duties to primarily fall on women. In rural Indonesian communities, where traditional gender roles are still deeply rooted, the language used subtly strengthens these norms by portraying domestic work as a natural part of femininity rather than something that should be shared equally within families. For example, phrases like “Ayah membantu ibu mengganti popok anaknya” (Dad helps mom change the baby’s diaper) imply that raising children and doing housework are the mother’s responsibilities, and the father’s involvement is merely a form of assistance, not an equal obligation. In contrast, saying “Ayah mengganti popok anaknya” (Father changes his child’s diaper) removes the assumption that caregiving is solely the mother’s job. It treats the father’s action as a normal and independent part of parenting.

These linguistic habits influence perceptions early in life, shaping how boys and girls see their roles at home. Boys often grow up believing their main focus should be on work outside the home, while girls are taught to see domestic labor as their primary role. This reinforces broader societal structures that limit women’s access to education and employment by instilling the belief that caregiving defines their worth. In rural Indonesia, where language is deeply intertwined with cultural traditions, changing how domestic responsibilities are framed through language can be a powerful way to challenge these norms. Research, such as the study by [Davis et al. \(2024\)](#), shows that when men encounter alternative expressions that treat household work as a shared responsibility, they are more likely to question traditional gender roles. This highlights how language reforms—like using more gender-neutral or inclusive terms—can slowly change perspectives and promote a fairer division of domestic tasks, helping to create greater gender equality in practice and mindset.

How word choice shapes understanding and fosters family harmony

By giving trigger material about "*Pengasuhan positif*", the speaker conveyed the importance of parenting involving fathers and mothers for the growth and development of children. This makes men aware of caring for children and makes women aware to always invite their husbands to care for and look after their children. This, then, makes women and men aware of other housework such as cooking, washing dishes, sweeping the yard, and so forth as a shared responsibility. In the end, this workshop provided an understanding that husband and wife cooperation is the key to becoming a harmonious family, one of the most fundamental manifestations of which is through word choice. Additionally, this was also reflected in "Deklarasi Solidaritas Perempuan" (second image from the right end in Figure 2).



Figure 2. The intervention of Kartini Corner in mainstreaming gender equality in Kendalrejo Village

Our observations thus far have shown that word choice has contributed to navigating the husband and wife's understanding of creating harmony in the family. The result of the current study was in line with what had been discovered by Davis et al. (2024) in their research project on gendered language. They initially declared that linguistic gender can be related to social norms leading to the justification for husbands to violate their wives. Thus, sex-based linguistic gender can affect how speakers think and behave. In the social context, these frameworks determine how individuals perceive others and themselves. However, when the structure of the language was modified, it deliberately reconstructed the husbands' initial "dominating" role in the family.

The renaissance: I know how to alter the right word!

The urgency of combating the traditional norms of gender roles in domestic settings through community empowerment is seen pivotal (Kabeer, 2021), particularly for family resilience amid the divorce trend in Indonesia (Zuhriah et al., 2024). Though understanding the cumulation of patriarchy is not elemental due to its nature of the invisible discrimination of labor (Pattenden, 2023), hence this advertency of everyday language perpetuates a new norm of gender roles in Kendalrejo village after seven months of intervention from Kartini Corner. Moreover, Liu et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of language used in shaping and reshaping gender identity.

Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2013) explored the concept of "doing gender", which suggests that gender is not a fixed attribute but something that is actively performed through language and social interactions. This perspective allows for a more dynamic understanding of gender, where shifts in language use can lead to shifts in gender norms. In the second Focus Group Discussion (FGD), the 10 participants shared their experience in using a new form of word choice in their everyday lives.

TA (59) has a role as a religious figure in Kendalrejo village. He articulated his understanding of the importance of word choice in generating gender norms by upgrading some diction in his daily preaching. A similar thing also happened to MF (52), she used language as a medium to end the double burden on women through her platform in an Islamic women's organization called Muslimat. Moreover, RJ (46) and LM (36), who initially thought that housework was a woman's responsibility, turned to be the most active in sharing the stories in how they have been involving the husband in taking care of the house, and it helped them, especially in maintaining their physical health. They also invited their brothers to help their wives take care of the children and clean the house.

Table 3. Reframing domestic role's word choice

Initial, Age, Sex, Education	New Word Choice Altered	The Target
TA, 59, M, SMA	"...."	...
MD, 36, F, SD	"Nak pekerjaan rumah adalah tanggung jawab kita sekeluarga, setelah makan, piringnya langsung dicuci ya"	Her son and daughter
MF, 52, F, SMP	"Hari ini berbagi pekerjaan rumah apa saja bersama suami?"	Her organization fellows
DS, 37, M, S1
RJ, 46, F, SD	"Aku yang nyuci baju, sampean yang jemur baju ya pak. Kita bagi tugas!"	Her husband
IM, 37, M, SI	"Aku mau masak, jadi setelah rapat di desa kamu gak usah beli makanan!"	Her wife
LM, 36, F, SMK	"Besok, giliran kamu yang jemput anak-anak ngaji ya"	Her husband
SR, 35, F, SD	"Aku mau tidur sebentar, si bayi aman sama bapaknya."	Herself
CM, 48, F, SD	"Aku jaga warung, kamu yang nyetrika seragam anak-anak ya"	Her husband
SJ, 49, M, SMA	"Gak perlu lama-lama di Desa kalau gak ada kerja, pulang dan bersih-bersih rumah."	Himself

This also validates the theory of empowerment by Kabeer (2018, 2021) in the importance of providing resource to shape agency in bringing into meaningful achievement. People in Kendalrejo village were facilitated by knowledge transfer about the impact of language choice. This seeded a new understanding in the heart of consciousness of the participant, which led them to action and new word choices in doing and participating in domestic work. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework used in this study created a space where all participants, regardless of socio-economic background, could reflect on the importance of language in shaping social norms. This suggests that while socio-economic factors do play a role in shaping attitudes toward gendered roles, the study also demonstrates that raising awareness about the impact of language—through community-driven workshops—can lead to a significant shift in perceptions, even in rural settings where traditional gender roles are deeply rooted. Ultimately, the research highlights the importance of providing resources that shape agency, enabling individuals across different socio-economic backgrounds to actively participate in promoting gender equality in domestic work.

CONCLUSION

The research highlights the significant role of language in shaping and sustaining gender norms within rural communities. Through participatory workshops and Focus Group discussions focusing on word choice, it was observed that conscious alterations in language

could effectively challenge and transform entrenched perceptions of gender roles, particularly within the domestic sphere. There is a shift paradigm in altering word choice in expressing domestic roles. It amplifies broader awareness since the involved participants act as prominent figures in Kendalrejo community. A new ecosystem emerges where the responsibility of domestic roles is shared equally regardless of gender. From this finding, it is recommended for all stakeholders at the village level to consider word choices in every medium and interaction and avoid gender bias that leads to rooting gender inequality in everyday lives. Gender roles in a domestic setting, which is often threatened as a neglected issue, should be more widely addressed particularly in the form of program intervention both initiated by government or non-government institution. This research acknowledges the potential social desirability bias. As the readers are given credence, this persuades them to rethink how communication shapes power dynamics and to adopt strategies that foster equality. Therefore, further research that explores diverse rural contexts and a larger sample, as well as the intersectionality of gender with other social factors such as education, economic status, and cultural practices are needed to develop a more nuanced understanding of how language influences gender dynamics across different contexts.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, data analysis; Author 2: Methodology, data collection, writing original draft preparation. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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