

Indonesia's Minangkabau culture promotes empowered Muslim women

Written by Sadiq Bhanbhro, Researcher on Public Health and Gender-Based Violence, Sheffield Hallam University

In most of the Western world, the image of Muslim women is often distorted. Muslim women have been represented as [homogeneous, veiled, submissive, helpless, oppressed and powerless victims](#).

Across Europe, countries are [placing bans on veils](#) on the grounds that they are symbols of oppression against Muslim women.

The construction and representation of Muslim women as being in need of saving, according to Lila Abu-Lughod in her book [Do Muslim Women Need Saving?](#), is problematic. Western media often gloss over the wealth of diversity Muslim women possess with regard to cultures, languages, opinions and the spectrum of faith.

There are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, half of them women. While many would think of oppressive regimes of Middle Eastern countries such as [Saudi Arabia](#) when thinking about Muslim communities, the majority of Muslims [live in the Asia-Pacific](#)

. And here there are places where Muslim women exercise much power, if not more than men.

Anyone visiting [West Sumatra](#), Indonesia, would be amazed – not so much by the beauty of its lakes and mountains, but by the prominent role women play in almost all spheres of life in the Minangkabau community. From the household to the marketplace, Minangkabau women hold pride of place.

The Minangkabau community provides empirical evidence and a case in point to understand the cultural diversity and integrative cultural patterns of Muslim communities.

Woman boss

“In your house, who is the boss?” asked a man while travelling from Jakarta to Padang. I was surprised by the question and paused to think of a response. “You see, I am a Minang and for a Minang woman is the boss,” said the man. The man belonged to Minangkabau – an indigenous ethnic group of Indonesia, which is famous for their long-held matrilineal tradition, or *matriarcha*

at
the Dutch).

(from

The [Minangkabau](#) (in short Minang) are also known for their devotion to Islam. A dominant majority of both males and females pray five times a day, fast during the month of Ramadan, and express the desire to make the holy pilgrimage ([Haji](#)) to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Each Minangkabau neighbourhood has a *Musalla*, which means “a temporary place of prayer” in Arabic but in Indonesia simply means a mosque. In the neighbourhood *Musalla*

, men and women pray together, although separated into their respective gender-designated sections. A high percentage of women and girls wear the headscarf but do not wear the veil.

I did research in [Padang](#) and visited [Batusangkar](#) and [Bukittinggi](#) . These are three major cities of West Sumatra province, the home of Minangkabau people.

Minangkabau matriarchaat

Minangkabau *matriarchaat* is an established social system that appears to be drawn largely from the customary practice (*adat*) that involves tracing inheritance through the matrilineal line and giving prominent roles to women in public ceremonies.

Minang women uphold these pre-Islamic *adat* customs, which not only trace ancestry through the female line but also involve a complex social system in which women and men share power and control based on the principle of interdependence and mutual responsibility.

Inheritance – Minang women have the upper hand

In Minangkabau, gender is a major factor in inheritance.

The ownership of property (such as land, house or livestock), for instance, must pass from mother to daughter; however, a father can pass earnings from a business or profession to son.

The former follows principles of *adat* and the latter Islamic law.

When couples marry, the groom moves to the bride's house. Nearly all household decisions are made only after being deliberated by both husband and wife.

Since the Minangkabau are also devout Muslims, it is interesting to observe how this community integrates the tenets of *adat* with those of Islam.

"*Adat* does not contradict but [rather] complements [the] values of Islam— such as, Islam gives the right of inheritance to women, [the] same [as] does *adat*," said a woman respondent.

Day-to-day decisions – Minang women lead

State policies and the increasing influence of Islam have escalated men's claim to power and authority in Minangkabau society. Men assume religious leadership, titled positions and roles in public life.

"Yes, men have public power. But think of them as front men, representing the community to the state or to the mosque," said Evelyn Blackwood an anthropologist who published ethnography on Minangkabau, [Webs of Power: Women, Kin, and Community in a Sumatran Village](#) .

Indeed, a closer look at various aspects of Minangkabau life shows that women exercise real power. They hold central roles in community ceremonies and ownership of resources – land, water and rice paddies. They also carry the lineage line.

Having actual power impacts Minang women's daily lives. "I can buy whatever I like from the market for eating, drinking and wearing – my husband can't interfere in it," said a woman respondent.

Women's ownership of land assures their power and position alongside men, said Blackwood.

Minang women have the upper hand in daily decisions involving household running – they decide on the budgeting, shopping, and kids' education.

The Minang ceremonies led by women – like a wedding (*Baralek*), harvesting (*Manyabik*), clan leader inauguration (

Batagak pangulu

) – are not only displays of women power but also play an important role in reminding young men of their cultural roots and responsibilities, according to

[anthropologist Peggy Sanday](#)

, who studied Minangkabau people.

Minang women value their central role

Minang women value their significant role in social and public life, especially during *adat* ceremonies and festivals when they sing and dance.

Tari Piriang

is one of the most famous traditional Minangkabau dances performed by both young men and women together.

“I feel *Tari Piriang* is an emancipatory art, which is not only about happiness but freedom,” said a medical student and member of a dance group.

Though music and dancing are contentious topics in Islam – fundamentalist versions of Islam such as Salafists and Wahhabis generally view music and dancing as forbidden (*haram*), while moderate believers regard them as permissible (

halal

) – the Minang people cherish their traditional performing art music, singing, dance and drama, and adore their ceremonies and festivals.

Although Islam may be generally thought to subordinate women and girls and to put men and boys in a dominant societal position, this devout Muslim Minangkabau community in Indonesia puts women at the centre of household and the community, presenting a very different picture of Muslim women.

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