

Family Communication Patterns and Gender Relations in Coastal and Mountain Communities in Aceh

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of gender relations and family communication patterns in coastal and mountain communities in Aceh to understand how family harmony is maintained in different socio-geographical contexts. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and documentation involving 20 families—10 from North Aceh District and 10 from Central Aceh District. This research is grounded in the analysis of gender partnership concepts and communication orientation theories. Data validation employed source triangulation, and analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, including data reduction, display, and verification. The findings reveal that mountain communities implement gender partnership models in the division of domestic and public roles, promoting equality. In contrast, coastal communities maintain a more traditional division of roles, with women in domestic and men in public spheres, albeit adaptively. Decision-making predominantly remains with male heads of families in both communities, though collaborative consultation is evident. Communication patterns differ: coastal communities display patterns of equality and imbalanced separation, whereas mountain communities emphasize balanced separation through traditional practices like manganese iyo. These patterns foster mutual understanding, openness, and trust, contributing significantly to family harmony and reducing divorce rates.

Keywords: *gender relations, family communication patterns, coastal communities, mountain communities, gender partnership.*

INTRODUCTION

The family, as a primary social group, holds a crucial role in shaping individual lives and sustaining societal structures (Gerungan, 2015; Koerner, 2014). As a central and enduring institution, the family profoundly affects the quality of life and societal functioning at large. Transactionally, families develop intimacy through shared behavior, experiences, and

aspirations, forming emotional bonds that foster distinctive family identities (Lestari, 2016). Communication within families emerges from these relationships, structured through patterns influenced by intimacy levels, individual standards, external factors, and communication orientations (Littlejohn, 2017). As communication significantly shapes familial cohesion, understanding these patterns is vital for grasping how families maintain internal harmony and influence broader social dynamics.

Family communication patterns vary systematically across different familial and socio-cultural contexts, with interactions characterized by mutual influence and reciprocity (Rahmawati, 2018). Devito (2019) identifies four family communication patterns shaped by conversation and conformity orientations (Koerner & Mary Anne, 2002). Open communication, marked by mutual respect, assistance, trust, and quality time together, becomes essential for fostering familial harmony (Praniti, 2019). Hawari (2015) emphasizes that strong interpersonal family relationships underpin this harmony, and Tirtawinata (2013) highlights that disharmony ranks among the leading causes of divorce. In Aceh, Sharia Court data shows a high incidence of divorce, particularly in North Aceh and Central Aceh, demonstrating the urgent need to strengthen family harmony through effective communication (Sadhali, 2022).

A harmonious family is essential for individual fulfillment and societal well-being, covering physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions (Gunarsa, 2007). Families serve as safeguards against worldly and spiritual harm, a principle emphasized in the Qur'anic teachings (Surah At-Tahrim:6). Family role divisions are profoundly shaped by gender relations, socially constructed through cultural norms (Fakih, 2013). However, gender inequalities, manifested through marginalization, stereotyping, violence, and political exclusion, challenge the realization of justice. Islam advocates gender equity, underscoring equal spiritual potential for men and women (Surah Ali Imran:195). In Aceh, diverse geographical contexts—coastal versus mountainous—further influence societal characteristics, resource access, and, subsequently, family communication patterns (Satria, 2015; Goo, 2018), demanding closer analysis of these dynamics.

Previous studies provide insights into family communication and gender relations but reveal critical gaps in contextualizing these within varied geographical settings. Koerner (2002) developed foundational theories on family communication schemas, while Ihza and Fadhilah (2022) emphasized the family's role in cultural transmission. Nuraida and Zaki

(2018) linked gender relations to interaction systems, and Odenweller and Rittenour (2013) connected communication patterns with gender ideologies. Patterns like laissez-faire and pluralistic communication further illustrate varied parental dominance (Sholeh, 2022; Hana & Nara, 2021). Studies by Poppel (2015) and Terry (2016) broaden the discourse by examining structural power and "doing gender." Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in understanding how gendered family communication patterns are contextually mediated by socio-geographic environments, particularly in Aceh.

Theoretically, this study draws upon family communication pattern theory (Koerner & Mary Anne, 2002), relational cultural theory (Littlejohn, 2017), and gender partnership concepts (Puspitawati, 2012; Ciptyaningrum, 2021). These frameworks facilitate a nuanced understanding of how communication and gender dynamics coalesce within families, especially against varying environmental and cultural backdrops. Furthermore, socio-cultural constructs affecting gender roles and communication are examined through the lens of social constructionism and structural functionalism, integrating perspectives on identity formation and relational power (Fakih, 2013; Terry, 2016). The theoretical integration ensures a comprehensive analysis of patterns underpinning family harmony.

This research aims to examine family communication patterns within the gender relations framework in Aceh's coastal and mountainous communities. Responding to identified gaps, it seeks to explore how geographical, socio-economic, and cultural conditions influence gender role divisions and communication styles within families. The study highlights both the general patterns and the nuanced differences between communities, contributing to a deeper understanding of how family communication structures and gender partnerships sustain or challenge familial harmony. The findings are intended to enrich theoretical discourses and offer practical insights for community empowerment and policy development.

The study hypothesizes that different geographical and socio-cultural settings in Aceh significantly affect family communication patterns and gender role dynamics. Specifically, coastal communities, shaped by open access to fluctuating resources, may exhibit distinct communication and gender role patterns compared to mountainous communities with more controlled resources (Satria, 2015; Goo, 2018). Preliminary data on high divorce rates in Aceh (Sadhali, 2022) underscores the importance of effective family communication and gender

partnership. Therefore, the study assumes that fostering gender-equal communication patterns is crucial for sustaining family harmony in diverse contexts.

Understanding family communication patterns and gender relations in Aceh's coastal and mountainous communities offers critical contributions to both academic inquiry and practical interventions. The research reaffirms that gender relations are culturally dynamic rather than fixed, influenced by shifts in societal thinking and socio-economic conditions. It underscores the importance of tailoring gender awareness and family communication initiatives to local socio-geographic contexts. The study's findings are expected to guide policymakers, community leaders, and educators in promoting harmonious family structures that uphold gender equity and social cohesion, thereby contributing to more resilient and inclusive societies

DISCUSSION

Gender Relations in Families in Coastal and Mountain Communities in Aceh

Gender relations in a family are formed based on the values and orders that apply to the community. Gender relations in coastal and mountain communities can be seen in the aspect of role division and decision making in the family. In mountain communities, the division of roles in the family does not differentiate between men and women. Domestic or household tasks can be done by both men and women.

“Since the children are still young, my wife and I do our domestic chores together. I will assist with the households’ chores whenever possible. Similarly, when it comes to farm work we help each other out.” (Iwan, people of mountain community, interviewed on 28 June 2022)

Another informant gave the same explanation regarding the division of household tasks that are carried out jointly between husband and wife.

“My husband and I help each other; indeed, I do my homework, but if my husband sees me tired, he is willing to help what he can. So, do the children. I have three children, two girls and the youngest is a boy who is 10 years old. Girls mostly helped the household tasks, the smallest one is able to take care of himself independently.” (Juliani, a member of a mountain community, interviewed on 28 June 2022)

The domestic role is perceived as a neutral role, meaning that it can be performed by both men and women. Likewise, the income generating activities which in mountain communities are identical to farming and gardening are also carried out jointly between men and women in the family. This is as conveyed by another informant.

“I have three sons and one daughter. They do their own laundry. Other tasks, such as cleaning the house and washing the dishes, are done alternately. So, there is no distinction between boys and girls in their desire to assist with household chores. Everyone pitches in to help out in the garden during the holidays.” (Hamidah, people of mountain community, interviewed on 29 June 2022)

Conversely, gender relations in families in coastal communities indicate that women are more likely to play a role in the domestic sphere and men in the public sphere.

Besides being a housewife, I also work as a kindergarten teacher, so I come home from work and cook at home, because my husband likes to eat at home. We also divide the tasks for the children, the boys draw water from the well and carry bucket of water and the girls sweep the house and fold laundry. Sometimes they protest too, so we explain the different tasks for men and women. (Rukiah, people of coastal community interviewed on 28 June 2022).

The same thing was conveyed by other informants in the following explanation.

“The one who makes the living is father, but mother contributes to the household finance, too. For household chores, I help my mother clean the house when I have time, usually in the morning before class or at night after I finish my activities. Other siblings who are still small are not given heavy tasks. My brother goes to boarding school so when he comes home he helps as much as he can. But he does not wash dishes, cook or clean, since those are woman's job.” (Novi, a member of coastal community, interviewed on 28 June 2022)

Coastal communities in North Aceh Regency are divided into two categories in terms of livelihoods. Fishermen make their living by living on the shore. The husband is the one who works at sea during the fishing season. However, when there is famine and the husband is unable to go to sea, the wife has to carry out both household and productive works outside the home. However, those who have urban connection and live in coastal settlements can make a living as workers, traders, and so forth. In this society, women can be part of the public and social spheres as well as the household arena. Thus, gender relations in coastal communities are quite adaptive as shown by the interview with the following informant.

“As a wife, I usually arrange supplies and equipment the morning before my husband sets sail. I clean up after my husband left. As my husband came back from fishing, I then assist him in cleaning and selling the catch. My husband needs to rest because he is worn out.” (Hasni, people coastal community interviewed on August 6, 2022).

The role of women in the domestic sphere cannot be separated from their activities as fishing families. In the post-harvest stage, women play a very important role in increasing household income. Women also play a role in managing finances so that the family's business can run continuously. Women manage income from fishing and oversee the family's business capital. When the family's financial condition is difficult, especially during the lean season

when the catch is small and insufficient to cover operational costs, it is women who expand their relationship as a means to increase their source of capital. Generally speaking, household gender-based division is determined by women's time allocation in income generating activities. The more time the women spend outside of the home, the less time they allocate to carry out household chores. In reference to household decision making, there are similarities between coastal and mountainous communities. In general, decision making is more dominated by men than women. However, decision-making in the realm of reproductive issues such as children's education is mostly done jointly between husband and wife. Children are also given room in voicing their opinions. While decision making in the productive sector such as management of fisheries or plantation businesses there are variations in answers, namely jointly between husband and wife, there is also direct decision making dominated by husbands, as following informed.

"In my family, my father makes the decisions. Children were also asked for their opinion. If there was something we wanted to convey, it was usually through my mother, later my mother would pass it on to my father. If there is a difference of opinion, we will settle it by following what my father said. Following father's rules." (Suryani, people of coastal community, interviewed on 29 June 2022)

The same thing was conveyed by another informant who indicated that the final decision was made by the man as the head of the family, even though all family members were included in the family discussion.

"As the head of the family, I heard the opinions and suggestions of the children, then I discussed them with my wife. Depending on the problem, if it is me who has to make the decision, then I have to make the decision. But I explained to the children why this decision was taken." (Nasruddin, people of coastal community, interviewed on 22 July 2022)

Based on the results of this study, gender relations in families in mountainous communities are based on gender partnerships. Gender partnerships can be seen in the cooperation carried out between husband and wife and between sons and daughters in doing domestic, public and social work. Gender partnership is defined as a form of fair and equal cooperation in the division of labour as well as in public, domestic and social functions and roles in society between husbands, wives, sons and daughters (Puspitawati, 2012). Gender partnership can also be referred to as the ability to cooperate with each other in carrying out roles in a balanced and fair manner (Ciptyaningrum, 2021). The division of roles or work in the family is a type of reciprocal relationship between husband and wife or father and mother

and children that creates harmony. This reciprocal relationship can be seen in gender partnerships in the family as an effort to adjust to each other. The shifting phenomena of a Muslim family function in the millennial era, in sociological perspective, require an effort of adjustment in the patterns of family behavior interactions. The role of family leader as the main breadwinner is not the only principle because a stay at home dad is one of alternative for Indonesian couples to foster their family (Supaat, 2019). In this case, the family must position its relationship in terms of complementing and assisting each other in all aspects of daily life, whether between husband and wife, father and mother, or sons and daughters. The success of reciprocal relationships in the family is determined by agreement and adherence to the agreement.

Gender relations in families in coastal communities are more adaptive hence it is advantageous for the family's survival. The division of roles generally places women in the domestic sphere with household tasks and men in the public sphere for earning a living, but there is an ample room for flexibility in times of crisis. During the lean season, when the family's income depleted, women make use of their social capital to borrow money from family and friends. (Hubeis, 2011).

Gender harmonization at the family level becomes the foundation for accord at the community and state levels. A solid gender cooperation in the family will result in an adequate gender cooperation in the economic, social and cultural aspects at the macro level (Rofi'ah, 2015). Research on a high rate of divorce among migrant workers' family indicates that shifts in gender relations pattern within the family contribute to family's disintegration. The increasing rate of divorce among those families is attributable to a greater financial contribution of wives compared to that of husbands, coupled with influence from abroad where women migrant workers work (Aminullah, 2015).

Generally speaking, decision makings in certain aspects of family's life is dominated either by a husband or a wife, even though other family members partake in the deliberation process. Hence, cooperation in the family includes the contribution of ideas, attention, moral assistance and advice from different family members. (Sumiyatiningsih, 2014). Decision making in the family is in reproductive purview, such as the education of children is mostly done jointly between husband and wife. Meanwhile, decision-making in the productive scope, such as managing a fishery or plantation business can be either made jointly between a husband and a wife or solely by a husband. These tendencies reveal the existence of a

gender partnership, that is a cooperation in the decision making process. There is a social expectation that gender-based division of roles and decision making will eventually lead to family.

Communication Patterns and Gender Relations in Aceh's Coastal and Mountain Communities

The family is the first place to learn as a social being because communication within the family is crucial. Family communication is a type of interpersonal communication that occurs between husband and wife or father and mother, between parents and children, and between children and other children. As shown in the following interviews, the informants from the mountain and coastal communities who became informants in the study explained the importance of communication in the family.

“Communication is very important in the family, because this communication is the child's first experience and becomes their foundation of social skill later in life. How children situate in the community, how they adapt their life in the community is shaped by pattern of communication within the family.” (Ibrahim, people of coastal community, interviewed on 25 July 2022)

“In my opinion, communication is important in families, with communication being the middle way to solve problems that exist in the family. So, whatever problems arise in our family, we discuss and find a way out. If there is no communication between husband and wife, or between us and our children, even between the children themselves, then we do not know what the obstacles are in our daily lives. So, communication is very important.” (Hasbi, people of mountain community, interviewed on 19 July 2022)

Based on the findings of these interviews, coastal and mountain communities both value family communication. Since the family serves as the first educational institution for children, family communication is essential. Family communication is crucial not only for daily survival, but also for socialization. Another informant emphasized the importance of communication in preventing family conflicts that can lead to divorce.

“I realized the importance of communication after experiencing conflict in my own household; communication is to foster mutual trust between husband and wife, and if there are problems, they must be openly and honestly communicated. If there is trust, there is a greater likelihood proof that the husband and wife will not betray each other. Many households are now divorced as a result of marital affairs.” (B researcher uses initials to protect the privacy of informant, people of coastal communities, interviewed on August 15, 2022)

Data from the interviews reveal that family harmony can be achieved through effective Communication as misunderstanding or miscommunication is a common problem in both family and social life. Statements given by several informants from both coastal and

mountain communities were also confirmed by the agency that handles family matters, as explained below.

“The concept of returning to the dining table is very important within the context of family planning. This means that family dinners must be shared. The Gayo community has always eaten together at night, which is known as mangan iyo. As a result, all members of the family must eat together at home. By doing so, husbands and wives can communicate, and parents and children can talk to each other. . Through communication, family resilience can be strengthened.” (Alam Syuhada, Head of the Office of Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection, Central Aceh District, interviewed on July 21, 2022).

The interview results are consistent with research observations about the Mangan-iyo eating tradition of the Gayo community in Central Aceh Regency, which is usually done after the maghrib prayer or before the evening prayer. This eating tradition is performed with all family members by sitting on a *teleten* (*peratas*) or other raised floor which is covered with a mat. A *Teleten* is typically made of wood and placed in the centre of the room, next to the kitchen. According to research findings, the habit of eating together gradually disappears in some families, and a *teleten* has begun to be replaced with a dining table, particularly among urban dwellers (Researcher's observation on 18-22 July 2022).

Communication behaviour or communication conditions in the family is a response to social culture. As culture differs from one society to another, the pattern of communication also varies from one family to another. There are differences in family communication patterns between coastal and mountain communities, as they are influenced by local socio-cultural conditions. Coastal communities have social relations that are relatively intense and egalitarian. Communication occurs openly and directly, with a more or less equal power among participants of the social relations.

The drawback of the communication patterns rests in lack of order, as each participant tends not to wait for their turn to speak, leading to a raised tone of voice or even verbal sparring. Furthermore, the communication is often dominated by the head of the family, resulting in unilateral decisions which do not leave an ample room for inputs from other members of the family. Conversely, in mountainous communities, family communication patterns illustrate gender partnership. Each individual in the family is seen as having expertise in their respective fields. When the need to make certain decision arises, all family members partake in the deliberation process and the husband or father as the head of the family will determine which opinion is going to be used as the basis for making decisions. The decision-

making process takes place in a family gathering for dinner, known as *mangan iyo* among the Gayo community.

“There is a mangan custom in Gayo, called mangan iyo, where all children and families gather together at dinner. If one child or anyone has not returned home, the meal cannot be prepared. This is the philosophy so that there is time together to communicate; we don't talk when we eat, but after we finish eating because everyone is still gathering, that's when we communicate, tell what the problem is, and then we look for a solution.” (Zulkifli, people of mountain community interview on 29 August 2022)

The balanced communication pattern demonstrates that all family members are considered important so the family members will listen to each other. The advancement of communication style has had a positive impact on traditional communication pattern, allowing for a more effective communication between families.

“Improved communication within the family is one of the programs offered by the Aceh Tengah district's Office of Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection. Returning to the dinner table is a program that encourages families to spend time talking openly and directly. Because, as far as we can tell, the most common cause of divorce is family discord, which is exacerbated by a lack of communication between married couples as well as among other family members. So, the official program is the same as the Gayo family tradition that has been practiced for many years. However, there has been a shift in a family communication pattern. Because some children have migrated to go to school, communication is now done via cell-phones.” (Alam Syuhada. Head of the Family Planning, Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Office of Central Aceh Regency, interview on 21 July 2022)

Family communication is not only important for daily survival but also for the socialization process. This communication involves family members and verbal and nonverbal symbols that can be understood by each other also reveal nuances of home, past and future experiences and identity. So, family communication needs to be done actively based on the family structure and dynamic. (Ascan, F.K. & Anne, 2002). Family communication often becomes an important discourse on family function as one of an entity in our society.

Parents are the pillars in providing a good environment in the family. Communication among family members and siblings is also found to affect the decision-making process in the family. Clear communication between parents and children can bring them to a very positive and effective interaction (Mustaffa et al., 2021). Effective family communication is formed through intimacy from both parties, growing commitment and mutual acceptance.

In this case, intimacy is defined as a relationship that takes place between individuals that fosters reciprocity and concern for each other's well-being (Johnson, 2016).

Communication is considered effective when family members are willing to provide a response or feedback. A positive impact on the relationship between husband and wife and between parents and children can occur through effective communication, that cultivates openness and mutual respect for each other (Fadhilah, N. 2021).

This is so because basically the family itself is formed through social interactions or relationships that take place continuously (Bahfiarti Tuti, 2016). Interaction between family members marks the start of the socialization experience, or the process of learning to communicate and understanding the value communication. Because the nature of the relationship between family members is unique and cannot be replaced, communication in the family is deep and personal (non-transferable). If a new relationship can be formed and the motive that initiated the relationship can be replaced with another motive, the individual in the same relationship cannot be replaced.

Family communication differs from other forms of communication in that it explains the structure of family relationships. In family communication, factors and family structures, as well as ways of responding to problems or actively solving them, are required. Effective family communication indicates the presence of positive interpersonal relationships. However, good interpersonal relationships are determined not only by the quantity but also by the quality of communication within the family (Fadhilah, N., 2017). Openness is one indicator of effective communication in order to create family harmony, which is demonstrated by mutual love, respect, trust, and understanding. Affection between families is an aspect of harmony that is demonstrated by understanding and respecting one another so that conflicts can be avoided. Effective communication in the family is realized by providing time together, maintaining honesty and cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that gender relations in the division of roles within coastal and mountain communities in Aceh demonstrate distinct socio-cultural dynamics. In coastal communities, gender roles tend to be segmented: men assume instrumental roles as

protectors and providers, while women undertake expressive roles in maintaining domestic stability. Family harmony is preserved as long as these traditional role boundaries remain intact. In contrast, mountain communities exhibit a gender partnership model, where roles between men and women are interchangeable across public, domestic, and social spheres. Family cohesion in these communities is achieved through mutual support, shared responsibilities, and respect for each other's roles. Furthermore, communication patterns differ significantly: coastal communities tend to adopt patterns of communication equality and separate unequal communication, reflecting a plurality family model, while mountain communities internalize a separate equal communication pattern through traditions like *manganese iyo*, aligning with a consensual family model.

The significance of these findings lies in their contribution to understanding the interplay between gender relations, communication patterns, and family harmony across different socio-geographical contexts. The study enriches gender studies by highlighting that gender partnerships and communication styles are not universally static but adaptive, depending on the local environmental, cultural, and social structures. It emphasizes the necessity of viewing gender relations not merely through a binary lens but within the broader fabric of communal life that shapes everyday interactions. The results provide valuable insights for gender-sensitive policy-making, family welfare programs, and educational efforts that promote equitable gender relations while respecting local cultural traditions. Understanding these dynamics helps strengthen community resilience and social cohesion amidst contemporary global transformations.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges its limitations in terms of its sample size, which was restricted to a specific number of families in North Aceh and Central Aceh. Broader and a more diverse sampling across other coastal and mountainous regions could enrich the findings and provide a more comprehensive picture. Future research should explore longitudinal studies to capture the evolving nature of gender roles and family communication over time, particularly under the influence of rapid technological advancement and shifting cultural values. It is recommended that local governments intensify socialization programs on values related to gender partnership while communities themselves are encouraged to

preserve and revitalize traditional practices that foster effective communication and mutual respect within families, ensuring the continued resilience of social bonds in a changing world.

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