

Self-Islah, Gender Relation and Socio-Economic Challenges on Tablighi Jamaat Proselytization Practice in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article explores one of the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) teachings self-islah that develops in its dawah practices. Self-Islah emphasizes improving oneself through a proselytization program called khuruj from one community to another, from one mosque to another. All this time, dawah was used as a medium to improve and correct others by Muslim priest (da'i) without being directly involved in the practice of islah. The phenomenon of JT dawah shows a different approach and pattern where da'i play dual roles not only as subject (preachers) but also as an object (listeners) during that khuruj program. Self-islah in this context includes strengthening faith, morals, and gender awareness. The gender aspect is strong external critics of JT religious tradition where it does not involve women in their religious activities and even avoids interacting with them. Thus, TJ members must handle all the needs while staying in the mosque for religious camps, such as washing clothes, cooking, washing dishes, and serving guests from the local and international community. The article will investigate changes in gender relations within the JT family in the post-khuruj program. This article also focuses on the economic challenges faced by Tablighi members when they go out of preaching (kburuj), especially those from the lower-middle class. They struggle to fulfill the needs during dawah and the family's needs who left at home, especially for long periods such as 40 days, three months, and one year.

Keywords: *Tablighi Jamaat, dawah, self-islah, gender changes, socio-economic challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) is one of the most significant transnational *dawah* movements in the Islamic world's modern history (Drury, 2014; Gent, 2018; Pieri, 2015; Siddiqi, 2012). Tablighi's teachings have reached the global community, including secular countries whose minority Muslim populations include the United States, Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, Russia, Germany, and Australia through sustainable *dawah* traveling (Drury, 2014; Noor, 2012; Sikand, 1998). TJ missionaries had targeted Muslim migrants in Western

countries through Pakistani and Indian links. Although Tablighi members are facing many challenges and obstacles when proselytizing in the field, especially in a country in which the Muslim community is a minority, however, their presence contributes a lot in strengthening Islamic values, enlivening mosques, activating dawah program, and building Islamic educational institution (Burki, 2013; Hamdi, 2015; Siddiqi, 2012). The consistencies in a purely religious activity that are not associated with a political agenda have been attracted local Muslim communities to be part of the Tablighi dawah mission.

TJ in Indonesia has shown a progressive development since its presence in the 1960s (Noor, 2010). TJ members have consistently preached about the surrounding local and regional community and took over mosques activity even though not all citizens accept their teaching idea. Statistically show that a total number of TJ members in Indonesia is estimated to be between 1-3 million people, and this number is still far below national Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama 140 million, Muhammadiyah 35 million, and Nahdlatul Wathan 5 million members (Hamdi, 2015; Sobary, 2010). Although as a minority group in Indonesia, the role of TJ cannot be underestimated. It has Markaz in each province in Indonesia, and these are actively leading the dawah program. This article generally examines the phenomena of the TJ movement in Indonesia related to its religious teachings and practices that have a positive contribution and a negative impact on another side. TJ figures successfully improve the members' spirituality, where they can correct or *islah* themselves after following *dawah* activities and guidance. However, the negative impact is also visible in dawah practices when the Tablighi doctrine emphasizes that all members sacrifice their time and wealth for *dawah*, which often becomes a significant issue at the family and community level.

Specifically, the article examines Tablighi's teaching about self-*islah* and co-*Islah* in the process of dawah practices called *khuruj*, a holy trip for conducting a *dawah* to different Muslim communities. The most prominent purpose of TJ dawah is strengthening and reinstalling spiritual elements to proselytizers and the followers who are the object of its dawah. Self-*islah* is the self-effort to correct personal issues in faith and spirituality through cooperation among members in the camp to achieve the highest spiritual enlightenment path. *Self-islah* and *co-Islah* have a significant impact on spiritual transformation at the individual and social level. The educational practice of *self-islah* and *co-islah* can be found in *zikir*, *taklim*, *mushawarah*, and *bayan*. Tablighi members also take advantage of this dawah program to be more independent, such as washing clothes, cooking, cleaning mosques, and serving other members. Members of Tablighi acknowledge that this independent attitude is carried away when returning home, where they actively help the wife, including cooking, washing clothes, and other homework. This

change in attitudes in the family relation led this article to examine gender relations at the family institution and gender education they gained during their preaching.

Tablighi's doctrine demands a high discipline, commitment, and sincerity to conduct religious dawah into the community (Chakrabarti, 2010; Drury, 2014; Rauf et al., 2019). TJ members have to proselytize during three days, forty days, three months, and a year depend on the ability and seniority. However, to actualize this, it needs many transportation costs, food, and other necessities, mainly going abroad (Metcalf, 2002; Gugler, 2010; Siddiqi, 2018). In addition to that, they also must fulfill the needs of their family who stay at home. Without any sponsor for these programs, the economy becomes a crucial issue, particularly for low-middles class people. In many cases, TJ members have to sell their land and other assets to fund their dawah. This dynamic leads the article to elaborate on what strategy they use to overcome the economic challenges.

This article is based on one year of research in three locations, including Lombok, Balikpapan, and Jakarta. I applied an ethnographic approach and qualitative method to collect and analyze data. I observed and participated in TJ religious and dawah activities, where I spent time with them in mosques. I also interview TJ religious figures, members, government, and other external communities to understand their responses toward TJ's religious teachings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Self-Islah and Co-Islah in TJ Dawah

Islam encourages Muslims to do proselytization, which teaches about Islamic teaching to others, whether directed to Muslims or non-Muslims who do not know and understand Islam. The command to preach has been stated in the Qur'an and Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad to call on good deeds and prevent evil or bad deeds (Al-Quran, Imron 104). The word dawah means to call, or invitation is a general term that refers to the preaching of Islam. In Indonesian and Malay, languages also use *the dawah* term, which is taken from Arabic. Johan Meuleman (2011: 236) explains that dawah primarily refers to activities aiming to strengthen and deepen Muslims' faith and help them lead their daily lives in conformity with Islamic principles.

Dawah activities have continued after the Prophet's death and were carried out by his friends and religious figures (*ulama*) until this modern century. The teachings of Islam have spread to various countries with an estimated 2 billion adherents in the world through communal dawah that the establishment of educational institutions strengthens to build Islamic character. Dawah and Islamic education cannot be separated because it has the same function of developing and strengthening Islamic teachings. Transnational Islamic movements such as

Tablighi Jamaat, Ahmadiyah, Muslim Brotherhood, Jam'iyyah al-Da'wah wa-al-Irshad, and Wahhabi have combined these two approaches of dawah and education for the expansion of their religious movements attracting the sympathy of the Muslim community to join. The rapid development of the dawah movement creates various methods and objectives that vary from organization to organization. Meuleman (2011: 237) states,

Since the birth of Islam, dawah has been an important aspect of this religion and dawah activities have always been highly appreciated in Muslim societies. However, in the course of the twentieth century, dawah activities and organizations have grown particularly strong all over the Muslim world and have adopted new forms and new aims. This phenomenon is related to two major developments which were partly contradictory: a renewed aspiration for international unity of all Muslims, on the one hand, and the formation of modern nation-states with their different religious traditions and – more importantly their conflicting political interests, on the other hand. Additional factors include the development of modern means of transport and communication as well as Christian missionary activities.

The differences in the methods and objectives of dawah in the Islamic world, according to Meuleman (2011: 237), cannot be separated from various factors such as interpretation of scripture, emphasis on specific issues, economic growth, social and political change, and modernity. The dawah methods and objectives seem to follow the wishes of the audience, and also there is a political intervention by the government in the affairs of this dawah. Urban communities that middle-class groups dominate prefer a pattern of preaching that suits their needs. Meuleman (2011: 237) also gives attention to the rivalry between the Islamic organizations in dawah and the external religious motivation against the missionary movement of non-Muslim groups. In Indonesia, those organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, Al-Irsyad, Hidayatullah, Wahhabi, and Salafi compete to gain authority and power in the public arena. He stated that political factors dominate dawah development in Indonesia, especially in the Suharto era.

Although Meuleman talked over the transnational Islamic movement such as TJ, Ahmadiyah, and Ikhawul Muslimin, he did not focus specifically on the discussion of paradigm in their *dawah*, so it is a noticeable gap and will be cover in this article. My focus here is on the TJ group related to its dawah methods and goals that are different from other transnational Islamic movements. One of TJ's dawah's purposes is *self-islah*, correcting ourselves and not entirely focusing on other people. Self-islah learning in TJ's dawah practice is part of its unique approach. Tablighi improves this approach after looking at the weakness of Islamic dawah, which only focuses on the object without involving the preacher as the subject. The preachers never thought

about themselves, but more to others. They only teach the material of religious discourses without giving any attention to themselves.

Self-*islah* is one of the main goals in TJ's dawah practices. TJ members see *iman* as a mobile phone; when the battery is empty, it needs to be charging to get a new power. On the other hand, Iman needs *dawah* as a medium to recharge the power when humans lost their *iman*. TJ members who come out for dawah have two purposes, to reform themselves and others. Maulana Muhammad Yusuf (2012) quoted Maulana Ilyas's statement saying that the primary purpose of TJ dawah is teaching *umat* comprehensively what the Prophet Muhammad taught. According to him, the Prophet Muhammad made an effort to change human worship and beliefs, obtain guidance, marriage, meetings, and transactions. To be able to achieve that, there are at least three types of efforts that must be carried out, namely *dawah* (invitation), *mashq* (practice), and *dua* (supplication).

Tablighi's dawah, which is communal, has an impact on self-*islah* and *co-islah* that is to improve each other among members. They went out preaching in groups of 5 people from more than one mosque, and this group would join groups from other mosques and be dispersed in various mosques outside their village. The strength of communality and solidarity between members who come out preaching is what plays a vital role in self-*islah*.

TJ dawah that involved a group of people also influence other members to get *islah* which I called *co-islah*. The cooperation and togetherness among TJ members in dawah play an essential role in accelerating the piety character and communal *islah*. Self-*islah* and *co-islah* happen together naturally during its dawah practices *kburiy fi sabilillah*. They advise and remind each other to focus on self-changes through maintaining *shalat jamaah* (daily congregational prayers) and other beneficial religious activities.

All activities in TJ dawah become part of self-*islah* learning process. There is a *taklim*, *musyawarah*, and *bayan*. *Taklim* is an Arabic word that means learning, where they make a small group study Islam by reading the famous book written by Maulana Zakaria called *Fadilatul Amal*. One person read two or three pages of the book, and the other must listen. Usually, *taklim* runs in the morning time like 8.00 to 9.00 o'clock after breakfast time. They take rest after *taklim* until *zuhur* pray. They also conduct a *musyawarah*, a regular meeting to discuss the progress of their dawah program and evaluate the spiritual improvement that they have achieved. They also use this *musyawarah* moment to share their spiritual experience to motivate and strengthen each other. All members have the same position and equal right to express their opinion, although the final decision will be taken from the majority voices and now body allow requesting after the

decision made. Usually, musyawarah is performed by sitting side-by-side in a circle from 5-12 people led by an amir, a temporary group leader in the Tablighi congregation.

Bayan is a program of religious talk that also becomes an effective medium to achieve *self-islam* and *co-islam* because the materials they deliver only about Allah, faith, and morality. The preachers do not speak non-religious material in the bayan program, including politics, economy, or family problems. TJ uses a different standard of selecting people who will give a bayan, not based on talk skill and mastering knowledge material rather social piety. They believe Allah guides them when delivering a *bayan* because they talk the truth of Allah. TJ also build a new religious tradition in its dawah program, where all members have the same position and equality as proselytizers. Each member must play double roles as a teacher and as a student. The member possibly becomes a teacher one day when he gives *bayan* or taklim and becomes a student on another day listening to other members delivering a *bayan*.

***Khidmat* and Gender Relation**

Khidmat comes from the Arabic word *khadama*, which means to serve or a service. *Khidmat* is one of the essential programs developed in JT tradition to serve others voluntarily as part of social and religious obligation. *Khidmat* becomes an obligation for Tablighi members to eliminate the ego and soften the hard soul. Abu Hurairah, a JT member from Lombok, said his ego decreased after following the regular *khidmat* during his *keburuj* program. Several activities that are part of *khidmat* are cooking, preparing meals for others, cleaning mosques, cleaning kitchens and dining rooms, and visiting sick people in a hospital near the Markaz. Food is an essential element in the TJ dawah ritual because they stay at the mosque for several days and even several months invite outsiders to join in and eat together. Therefore, they provide food to guests and JT members for free. For instance, at an *ijtima* event, local members are assigned to cook and serve guests from foreign countries. Because of this cooking tradition, JT members are well known as *stoves da'i* (*da'i kompor*) where they carry stoves for cooking when the preaching is running.

TJ members use *khidmat* as a medium of training patience and releasing the ego. Each member has the opportunity to perform *khidmat* solemnly without considering class and social status. Either the member is a medical doctor, lawyer, police, or religious figure treated equally regarding taking *khidmat* program. This section will elaborate on the role of *khidmat* in changing personal behavior, character, and gender perspective and relation in family. This *khidmat* will lead JT members wiser, more careful, respect toward women, especially their wives. Most JT followers in Indonesia are from a strongly patriarchal culture. Therefore, JT members have to

negotiate the nature and nurture patriarchal behavior when doing *khidmat* work such as cooking, providing food, and cleaning.

The argument was how *khidmat* changes attitude and gender relations in the family. Abu Hurairah explains the significant transformation and changes in his behavior toward his wife. Usually, he acknowledges that he got an anger problem and very dependent on his wife. His wife must serve him everything, including making coffee in the morning and washing clothes. After *khidmat*, it was opposite where he takes over her work the previously the wife did. He said, automatically, he makes coffee on his own and washes his and her clothes. He also acknowledges that his love is stronger to his wife and more sincere to serve her like cook and wash her clothes. He tries to implement what he learned from *dawah* and maintain consistency following Muhammad's *sunnah*, particularly assisting the wife in domestic affairs.

Ahmad Ridho (50 years old), a member of JT from East Lombok, also confesses that there is a significant change in his behavior and attitude after taking time for *khidmat*. He is no longer relying on his wife and instead always helps to complete her work. He was more active than before to do what can do without being ordered by his wife. I went to his house for an interview and met him alone at that time. His wife was, and her family was going out to a beach for vacation. He welcomes and offers me lunch from his cooking. He immediately cooks, cutting vegetables and frying fresh fish and chicken in the kitchen. Once cooked, he called the other Tablighi members to eat together in his house. Before lunch, we went to the mosque for *zuhr* pray, and after that, we got lunch. I took this moment to interview other members of JT to complete my research data.

From data above show that *khidmat* has multiple effects, including changes in gender relations within the family. The exchange of social roles and gender segregation without religious awareness is difficult to happen in a Muslim community. Religious consciousness plays an essential role in raising new awareness beyond gender differences but more on humanity. Most JT men willingly and sincerely play a social role usually performed by women or wives during the *dawah* program. Their *dawah* movement from one city to another had a significant impact on changes in gender relations in which women had to play a double role replacing the husband role. In Tablighi's belief, leaving their wives in performing the *dawah* program is part of woman empowerment, where women are more independent after living alone and taking care of children. They believe it was heresy and *shirk* when wives rely on their husbands, not on God. This *dawah* program gives them training space to be more independent and take over their husband's work.

Religion and Poverty: Socio-Economic Challenges in TJ Dawah

Religion and poverty are among the discourses that scholars have widely researched and discussed, mainly how religion affects poverty. According to Jaco Beyers (2014), religion and poverty are two different things. Religion is concerned with non-material elements, namely spirituality, while poverty is closely related to a material element. The difference in this dimension (material and non-material) shows that they do not have a direct relationship so that the study of religion and poverty is seen from the relationship between both. This external relationship can be seen in how religion and poverty influence each other. Discourses on poverty can be found in holy texts such as the Koran, the Bible, the Tripitaka, and others (Beyers, 2014; Kroessin, 2008).

Religion and poverty are social phenomena inherent in human life that are difficult to separate. These two social phenomena have different impacts on humans, where religion is assumed to be something positive and functions to help humans solve their problems (Beyers, 2014; Geremek, 1994). Meanwhile, poverty is considered to be something that harms the loss of human dignity. Religion itself sees poverty in various ways. Islam sees poverty as a social challenge that must be faced together by helping each other (Kroessin, 2008). Christians see poverty as a punishment for the sins that have been committed, while Buddhists see it as karma (Beyers, 2014: 3).

Religious texts, especially in the Quran, recommend a social action to fight against poverty by paying money and other material in *the zakat*, charity, and donation system. Geremek (1994:11) identifies capitalism as the origin of poverty. It is undoubtedly irresponsible to reduce the origin of poverty to one single aspect. Peculiarly enough, poverty, according to Geremek (1994:11), contributed to the development of capitalism, and simultaneously poverty resulted from capitalism. Along with capitalism came the processes of industrialization and commercialism, fuelling an unstoppable economic engine; for many centuries, some considered capitalism to be the solution to poverty (Geremek 1994:11). Currently, the introduction of technology is considered by some to be the solution to poverty. Technology can, for instance, lead to developing more advanced agricultural machinery alleviating poverty through better farming techniques.

In the TJ community context, the patterns of dawah and ritual practices have caused poverty in its members. Based on my findings, that TJ dawah program that spends a minimum of three days and a maximum of one year on going dawah is the primary source of the economic crisis in the JT community. Every member must spend much material to finance this dawah cost, including transportation and meal. This pattern has raised a critical question about the strategy to

overcome this financial issue. This section elaborates on the economic issue during the dawah program, mainly how TJ members manage and control their economy due to the high cost of traveling. This is the major challenge for the JT family when the husband formally takes part in JT dawah activities in the socio-economic contexts. They focus on *dawah* rather than collecting material. Even in many cases, some JT members sell their assets and property to pay all dawah expenses.

My data shows how JT members prioritized dawah and did not care about the economy. They live in simplicity with inadequate facilities and conditions. The Doctrine of Sufi asceticism (*zuhud*) strongly inspired JT followers to live a simple life and significantly influenced a new religious lifestyle, in which they have no ambition to collect material and ignored social competition. TJ members believe material orientation is an obstacle to achieve the highest spiritual level of unification with God. However, I found another data that shows a different reality where few JT members have an economic activity surrounding JT Markaz. They sell religious accessories such as a robe, *tasbeeh* (prayer beads), *simak* (traditional toothbrush from wood), *perfume*, *turban*, religious cap, and *sarong* (scabbard). So, it depends on the intention of JT members. Not all of them focus on dawah; rather also they have an economic vision and mission.

As a global missionary movement, JT members come from various nationalities, ethnicities, traditions, languages, and professions. A similar condition also visible in the JT community in Indonesia, where JT members are plural in terms of ethnicities, traditions, social class, and profession. Some middle-class workers work as businessmen, lecturers, soldiers, politicians, bureaucratic officials in government institutions, school teachers, and some lower classes working as labor, farmers, and security. Therefore, the economic strength and capacity also vary to each member, which affects their ability to pay transportation cost in proselytization program. I will focus on JT members in Indonesia, who have severe challenges and severe economic impact during proselytization.

In January 2017, I traveled to Selong city, East Lombok attending *ijtima*, an international meeting that involved all members from Asia at the Grand Mosque in Selong. I met my cousin in this Grand Mosque meeting, who is an activist of JT. As a local member of TJ, he was assigned as a cook for guests' meals during *ijtima*. After serving those guests, he asked me to accompany him to pick up Rahman (45 years), a Tablighi member who is not active anymore in TJ dawah. Rahman lives in Banjarsari village East Lombok only 7 kilometers from the location of *ijtima*. When we arrived at his house, the wife directly attacked us with anger and rude, saying, "do not bring your JT friends here, I do not need them, I need money, our family needs money". When

her husband left his works to conduct a dawah trip, she was traumatized, while no one could replace him as peasant labor. He got a peasant labor job, and it was a primary source of family income. She told us if her husband is responsible to the family and prevents us from taking him away to the dawah arena. She also said that she had children, and no one cares about us when he was not here.

The real challenges were experienced by the Ahmad family (55 years old), who is suffered from dawah activity. He has to sell his cattle to buy a ticket for his dawah traveling all around Lombok and Java island. He believes that those cattle have the same value as Eid Al-Adha's animal as long as we intend to be sincere and complete submission to God. He never worried about the economic family. He spends much money on dawah, and he was ready to sell whatever he has as far for Allah. He declared, "God will replace with a greater number of what we sacrifice," as God promised in the Qur'an.

Another case from the Rahmawati family (38 years old) in Lombok. She cannot do anything when her husband, Miftahul Huda, is engaged to JT dawah because she has to take care of three little children. She was disappointed in the husband when he left his job as a farmer. She cannot handle his job in the rice fields picking tobacco leaves and drying them. She complained to her father-in-law about her situation, and the father looks for him checking which mosque he stays. He found his son at the mosque participating in JT dawah. He shouted to his son and challenged him to fight. He stated, "let face me, if you are gentlemen, why are you leaving your job and family at home." Huda responded and advised his father to be patient and remember God. He returned home and canceled his dawah program.

A similar case from Samarinda East Kalimantan that happened in Fatimah's family. She threatened to divorce the husband after join a JT dawah. He went out of town and left his. She cannot handle all the works and responsibilities at the family level, including taking the children to school and managing the family business of motorbike workshops. Her husband has a workshop place for motorbike services, which is the primary income resource of the family. Consequently, during the dawah activity, he must close the workshop. Fatimah gave him two options, whether divorce or continue as JT followers. The husband is aware of this problem and decided to quit JT dawah activities and rerun his business.

Bandi (43 years old), a young JT member who was previously successful in his business affair, suddenly experienced severe economic problems after being a JT follower. He started his career from the bottom, running his computer rental, radio station, and language course. His wife works as a civil servant in the Central Lombok government office. Bandi said the growth of his economy from his business company did not make him comfortable. There is something

disturbing him in mind and soul until he saw a group of people praying in the mosque wearing white robes. They also visited people's homes and delivered a religious message. Although he was curious and did not know about this group, he feels like *deja vu* with those people reminded him of the imagination of the Prophet Muhammad's life and his disciples in the Arab lands of the 7th century. This first meeting with this group impressed him, and he began to join and learn their dawah teachings. He finally leaves the family to conduct a Jt dawah program without his wife's permission due to her objection. She did not permit him to do a dawah, although three days. After going out for three days, she starts to accept him, and again he went for ten days and three months to India. Because he was too active in JT dawah activity, his business began to collapse. Before joining the JT dawah movement, his company usually get a profit from IDR. 15-20 million per month, now decreasing to 2-5 million. His brother acknowledged that he could not even pay the business rent.

Those data show how JT members struggle with their economic stability while participating in the JT dawah program. In some cases above, dawah has a significant effect on the economy due to different focuses and orientations. The influence of JT ideology "asceticism" is also the most significant challenge on JT's new members, where they have new motivation and enter a new realm of nonmaterial. Most JT members I interviewed in Lombok, Jakarta, Samarinda were not interested in talking about business and economy; instead, they focus on spiritual development. They live a simple life and focus on improving themselves by surrendering to God in total. I do not deny that economic activities are surrounding JT headquarters such as in Temboro East Java, Jakarta, Lombok, and Samarinda they built stores for Muslim clothes, small restaurants, and small hotels.

CONCLUSION

Self-islah is the primary goal of TJ dawah that all TJ members must achieve. When TJ members in a *dawah* camp program, they have to *islah* themselves than other people. Self-islah program makes TJ dawah different from other Islamic organizations, in which religious figures only focus on *islah* other people and forget their needs. So, TJ dawah changes approach and goal to be more effective and possibly involved both sides to achieve islah. All TJ dawah programs are related to *self-islah* and *co-Islah*; it strengthens individuals and other members in a group for the dawah camp program in faith, *ibadah*, and morality. Self-islah can be found in ritual and religious activities such as *taklim*, *zikir*, *bayan*, and *musyawarah*. Self-islah and co-islah are naturally working together in this pattern because every member gives support to each other.

Khidmat also another program that encourages transformation attitude more broadly for JT members. All members of Tablighi acknowledged *khidmat* as a suitable training medium for them to be more sincere, gentlemen, and respectful because through *khidmat* JT member experience to serve others. *Khidmat* also raises gender awareness and changes the gender relationships in the family. Usually, before *khidmat*, JT members have a solid patriarchal perspective due to the cultural construction of gender bias. They have to negotiate and harmonize the internal conflict within themselves. It also happens when they enter the new realm of dawah that leads them to release the ego and ambition to collect material in their life. The transition to be more spiritual close to Allah and minimize material influence and economic activity are not always easy because they still have another responsibility toward the family.

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