

Autonomy vs. Societal Pressures: The Dilemma of Independent Women in Modern Society

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences and challenges faced by independent women in Sumatera Utara, Indonesia, within the context of education, societal roles, and gender expectations, a regional context that has received significantly less scholarly attention than Java-based studies, despite its distinctive cultural dynamics shaped by Batak ethnic traditions and Islamic values. Using a descriptive qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three purposively selected participants representing meaningfully distinct life stages and social positions: a university lecturer, a divorced single mother, and a university student in a male-dominated field. These three profiles were chosen because they collectively illuminate how independence is experienced, negotiated, and contested across different points in the life course, enabling depth of analysis rather than wide range of statistical coverage. Findings reveal that while participants define independence as control over personal and professional decisions, they encounter significant societal pressures tied to traditional expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and conformity to conventional gender roles. Each participant negotiates her autonomy at considerable psychological cost, including experiences of frustration, isolation, and self-doubt. Interpreted through Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework, particularly her concepts of immanence, transcendence, and the Other, the study highlights women's resilience in asserting independence despite cultural constraints, while underscoring the need for policy interventions promoting educational access, economic opportunity, and cultural transformation.

Keywords: Women's Independence, Societal Pressures, Existentialist Feminism, Indonesia

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji pengalaman dan tantangan yang dihadapi oleh perempuan mandiri di Sumatera Utara, Indonesia, dalam konteks pendidikan, peran sosial, dan ekspektasi gender, sebuah konteks wilayah yang kurang mendapat perhatian akademis dibandingkan studi yang berpusat di Jawa, padahal wilayah ini memiliki dinamika budaya khas yang dibentuk oleh tradisi etnis Batak dan nilai-nilai Islam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan tiga partisipan yang dipilih secara purposif untuk mewakili tahapan kehidupan dan

posisi sosial yang sangat beragam: seorang dosen, seorang ibu tunggal, dan seorang mahasiswa di program studi yang didominasi laki-laki. Ketiga profil ini dipilih karena secara kolektif dapat menggambarkan bagaimana kemandirian dialami, dinegosiasikan, dan diperjuangkan pada berbagai titik perjalanan hidup, sehingga memungkinkan analisis yang mendalam alih-alih sekadar cakupan statistik yang luas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun para partisipan mendefinisikan kemandirian sebagai kendali atas keputusan pribadi dan profesional, mereka menghadapi tekanan sosial yang signifikan terkait ekspektasi tradisional mengenai pernikahan, peran sebagai ibu, dan tuntutan untuk mematuhi peran gender konvensional. Setiap partisipan menegosiasikan otonominya dengan konsekuensi psikologis termasuk pengalaman frustrasi, isolasi, dan keraguan diri. Melalui interpretasi menggunakan kerangka kerja feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir, khususnya konsep imanensi, transendensi, dan Liyan, studi ini menyoroti ketangguhan perempuan dalam menegaskan kemandirian di tengah hambatan budaya, sekaligus menekankan perlunya intervensi kebijakan yang mendorong akses pendidikan, peluang ekonomi, dan transformasi budaya.

Kata kunci: Perempuan Mandiri, Tekanan Masyarakat, Feminisme Eksistensialis, Indonesia

A. INTRODUCTION

The topic of education, independence, and the roles that women navigate in family and society constitutes a dynamic and politically significant area of study, particularly in the context of rapid globalisation in the early twenty-first century (Idrus et al., 2023). As societies evolve under the dual pressures of modernisation and cultural continuity, traditional roles assigned to women are increasingly questioned, renegotiated, and redefined (Purwaningsih & Gulö, 2021a; Rajeswari et al., 2021a). This shift has brought renewed critical attention to the concept of the “independent woman,” a term that encompasses autonomy in both personal and professional spheres and that carries distinct resonance across different cultural and national contexts. Derived from the English-language tradition of liberal individualism, independence signifies freedom from external control, according to Oxford Languages, it implies “not subject to outside authority” and “not depending on others for support or a living.” Yet this definition, when applied to societies with strong collectivist and patriarchal traditions, immediately reveals its limitations that independence is not simply a condition to be claimed but a status to be negotiated, contested, and maintained against ongoing social pressure.

In both the family and society, women play strategic responsibilities that are essential to the social structure. A growing number of women across the Global South, particularly Indonesia, women are taking up leadership roles and making decisions that demonstrate their independence and ability to influence their environment (Gardner, 2020; Rigopoulou, 2021). These roles extend beyond traditional domestic duties into fields such as education, politics, healthcare, and business. Yet women striving for independence frequently encounter social and personal obstacles that are structural in character rather than merely interpersonal. Societal expectations, shaped by deeply rooted cultural norms and reinforced through institutional

practices, often dictate that women should prioritise familial duties over personal or professional ambitions. Among the most persistent material barriers is poverty, which limits women's capacity to fully engage in critical social roles and responsibilities. Low level of education is one of the main causes of poverty among women and significantly limit their capacity to be independent, creates cycles of disadvantage that are challenging to break without focused intervention (Budiman, 2012; Dewi, 2022).

In the Indonesian context is particularly revealing in this regard. Despite the Indonesian constitution guaranteeing the right to education for all citizens regardless of gender, a notable gap in educational attainment between men and women persists. According to BPS (Badan Pusat Statistik) data from 2015, for every 100 individuals aged 20–44, there were four illiterate men compared to nine illiterate women, a ratio reflecting historical and structural inequalities rather than individual differences in capacity or aspiration. However, recent data signals meaningful progress that the Central Bureau of Statistics' 2022 Gender Equality Index (IKG) recorded a value of 0.459, with the percentage of women aged 25 and over who completed high school or higher education rising from 34.87 percent in 2021 to 36.95 percent in 2022. Most strikingly, data from the Diktiristik Database indicate approximately 3.25 million female university students compared to 3.09 million male students, a reversal of historical patterns indicative of shifting societal attitudes toward women's education. On 3 August 2024, Secretary-General Suharti of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology emphasised the government's commitment to increasing gender equality in education, pointing to scholarships for female students from low-income families and vocational training programmes targeting young women. Yet as this study demonstrates, formal educational and policy advances do not automatically translate into the lived experience of independence that they must be accompanied by cultural transformation.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, three significant gaps. First, the majority of Indonesian studies on women's independence focus on Java, leaving the experiences of women in outer islands, including Sumatera Utara, with its distinctive Batak cultural traditions, strong Islamic identity, and different patterns of gender socialization underexplored and undertheorised. Second, existing studies tend to examine women's independence either through textual or structural lenses, rarely integrating the lived, phenomenological dimension: the subjective, first-person experience of negotiating autonomy against cultural pressure in everyday life. Third, while de Beauvoir's framework has been applied productively in Western feminist scholarship, its systematic application to the specific experiences of Indonesian women navigating independence across different life stages; professional women, single mothers, and students—has not yet been undertaken. The present study addresses these gaps directly by centring the phenomenological experiences of three women from Sumatera Utara, interpreted through a de Beauvoirian framework, thereby contributing both regionally specific empirical data and a theoretically grounded analysis of the mechanisms through which cultural norms constrain and are resisted by independent women in contemporary Indonesia.

The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's theory of female freedom provides the essential theoretical foundation for this study. In *The Second Sex* (1949/2010), de Beauvoir argued that women are not born with predetermined roles but are socially constructed as the "Other" through patriarchal structures that assign them an imminent, domestically defined existence while reserving the transcendent, world-shaping domain of human activity for men. Her existentialist assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 2010, p.293) underscores the role of social conditions, rather than biology, in shaping women's subjectivity and curtailing their freedom. According to Bergoffen (2020), de Beauvoir maintained that authentic freedom for women requires transcending externally imposed roles through education, economic independence, self-awareness, and active participation in public life. Applying this framework to contemporary Indonesia reveals that women's pursuit of independence remains constrained not by nature but by entrenched cultural norms, institutional structures, and everyday social practices that continue to position marriage and motherhood as the primary markers of feminine identity and worth.

Scholarship on women's independence in Indonesia has grown considerably over the past decade, yet it remains unevenly distributed across regions and analytical frameworks. Studies conducted primarily in Java, particularly in urban centres such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya, have documented the tensions between women's increasing educational and professional participation and the persistence of patriarchal cultural expectations (Hermanto, 2019; Suhariono & Claretta, 2024). Research employing feminist literary criticism has illuminated how gender subordination is reproduced through cultural texts and representation (Adelina & Suprayogi, 2020; Diary & Kiranamita, 2021; Purwaningsih & Gulö, 2021b), while sociological studies have traced the structural dimensions of women's labour and care burdens (Hochschild, 1989; Rajeswari et al., 2021b). More recently, scholars have turned attention to digital spaces as emergent sites for the negotiation of women's independence, demonstrating that platforms such as TikTok can simultaneously empower and constrain women's self-expression (Utami & Arianto, 2024a, 2024b). Theoretically, de Beauvoir's (1949/2010) existentialist feminist framework has been applied productively to Western contexts, and to a more limited extent to Southeast Asian settings, to explain how cultural structures condition women toward immanence and restrict their access to transcendence. Budiman (2012) further demonstrates how literature and cultural production shape moral and social values, including those pertaining to gender, in the Indonesian context, a dimension that enriches the present study's concern with the cultural reproduction of norms constraining women's independence.

This paper examines the challenges faced by three Indonesian women as they attempt to balance personal and professional lives while navigating significant societal and psychological pressures. By analysing their lived experiences through de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist lens, the study illuminates how social expectations continue to constrain women's potential and highlights the importance of addressing these pressures, at both the individual and structural level, for the realisation of genuine gender equality in Indonesia.

B. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminist theory provides the primary conceptual anchor for this study. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949/2010) remains foundational to any serious thing with women's experiences of independence and constraint. Her argument that women are constituted as the "Other" within patriarchal society, systematically denied subjectivity, agency, and the right to self-determination, offers a powerful analytical lens through which to examine the constraints experienced by Indonesian women in the present study. De Beauvoir's central conceptual distinction between immanence and transcendence is particularly relevant; she argues that women are socially conditioned toward immanence, including passivity, domesticity, repetitive labour, and dependence on others for the definition of their identity, while genuine human flourishing, which de Beauvoir associates with transcendence, requires active engagement with the world, self-determination, and the exercise of freedom to create meaning and pursue projects. The societal pressures documented in this study, toward marriage, motherhood, conformity to conventional femininity, and the subordination of professional ambition to family obligation, reflect precisely the conditioning toward immanence that de Beauvoir identified as the defining feature of women's oppression (Bergoffen, 2020).

Feminist literary criticism enriches this theoretical framework by demonstrating how patriarchal norms are reproduced not only through institutional structures but through cultural texts and representational practices. As Moi (1985) demonstrates in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, feminist criticism challenges the androcentric epistemologies that have historically centred male experience as the universal standard of humanity, rendering women's perspectives marginal or invisible. This critique extends beyond literature to the social realm: the same androcentric logic that erases women's voices in cultural texts operates in institutional and everyday practices that subordinate women's professional ambitions to domestic expectations. Adelina and Suprayogi (2020), Diary and Kiranamita (2021), and Purwaningsih and Gulö (2021) have each demonstrated, in Indonesian literary and cultural contexts, how feminist critical approaches can reveal layered structures of subordination and marginalisation, offering methodological precedents for the kind of critical analysis of lived experience undertaken in this study.

The intersection of gender, labour, and care is central to understanding the structural dimensions of women's experience to be independent. Hochschild's (1989) concept of the "second shift", the substantial burden of domestic work and emotional labour that professional women disproportionately carry in addition to their paid employment, remains one of the most incisive accounts of how formal gender equality in the workplace coexists with persistent inequality in the home. Even when women achieve professional success and financial independence, they frequently remain responsible for the bulk of caregiving, household management, and the emotional work of maintaining family relationships. This double burden intensifies the psychological costs of independence and creates a structural asymmetry that individual resilience alone cannot resolve. Rajeswari, Radha, Kalyani, and Mamatha (2021)

document analogous dynamics in corporate and professional settings, finding that women's invaluable contributions to organisations are nonetheless accompanied by work-life balance demands and the implicit expectation that such demands without complaint or institutional accommodation.

In the Indonesian context specifically, scholarship has documented the persistence of patriarchal gender norms alongside increasing women's educational and professional participation, creating a characteristic tension between formal advancement and cultural constraint. Hermanto (2019) argues that education is the single most important driver of women's independence in contemporary Indonesia, providing not only economic opportunity but the critical consciousness necessary to identify and resist cultural impositions. Yet educational attainment alone does not fully dismantle the expectations that constrain women's choices: many highly educated Indonesian women continue to experience pressure to prioritise marriage and family over professional career, and to accept that their career trajectories will be shaped by the needs of others rather than by their own aspirations. Budi Lestari, Kurniawan, and Ardi (2020) trace how economic hardship intersects with gender norms to limit girls' educational trajectories from an early age, with families in financially constrained circumstances often prioritising boys' education on the grounds that it represents a more secure long-term investment, a logic that perpetuates the cycles of dependency it significances to manage.

Social media has emerged as a contested terrain for the negotiation of women's independence in contemporary Indonesia. It is offering both new possibilities for community, visibility, and self-expression and new trajectories for the reproduction of gendered surveillance and control. Suhariono and Claretta (2024)) demonstrate that motivational content on platforms such as TikTok can meaningfully reinforce self-confidence among young women, providing an alternative community of affirmation that partly compensates for the absence of institutional and familial support. For women navigating the demands of independence in contexts where social approval is conditional and often withheld, digital communities can serve as significant sources of validation and solidarity. However, as Utami and Arianto (2024)) document, social media platforms also reproduce and intensify gendered norms through cyberbullying, the policing of women's online expression, and the amplification of judgments about women's appearance, lifestyle choices, and conformity to conventional femininity. Digital empowerment, in this view, does not automatically translate into structural change; it operates within, and is constrained by, the same cultural logics that shape women's offline experiences.

Taken together, this body of literature establishes that Indonesian women's pursuit of independence is shaped by a complex interplay of philosophical, structural, cultural, and digital forces, operating across the domains of education, labour, family, and public life. The present study contributes to this landscape by bringing these forces into direct dialogue with the concrete, phenomenological experiences of three women navigating independence in Sumatera Utara, a context that has received less scholarly attention than Java and whose particular regional, religious, and cultural dynamics merit closer examination.

C. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology to explore the nuanced and contextually embedded experiences of independent women in Indonesia. As Creswell and Poth (2016) argue, qualitative research enables comprehensive and depth-oriented exploration of social phenomena by foregrounding participants lived experiences, meanings, and perspectives, an orientation that is essential for investigating subjective experiences of autonomy, constraint, and negotiation that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. A phenomenological approach is adopted as the specific methodological framework, following Husserl's (Smith et al., 2009) foundational concern with the structures of conscious experience and Heidegger's hermeneutic elaboration of its situatedness in social and historical context. This approach provides analytical access to the subjective realities and personal interpretations of each participant regarding their roles, identities, and experiences of independence, enabling the researchers to attend carefully to the meanings that participants themselves attribute to their experiences rather than imposing predetermined analytical categories.

The study was conducted in Sumatera Utara, a province selected for three interconnected reasons. First, Sumatera Utara presents a distinctive cultural landscape shaped by the intersection of Batak ethnic traditions, Islamic religious values, and rapid urbanization, a combination that produces particular and underexplored tensions between women's growing educational participation and the persistence of patriarchal gender norms. While studies on Indonesian women's independence have proliferated in Javanese urban centres such as Jakarta and Yogyakarta, the experiences of women in Sumatera Utara remain largely absent from the scholarly literature, constituting a significant regional gap that this study addresses. Second, the province's capital, Medan, is one of Indonesia's largest cities and hosts several major universities, making it a site where women's professional and educational ambitions are actively cultivated yet frequently come into tension with surrounding cultural expectations, a productive context for examining the dynamics of independence under pressure. Third, the co-author's institutional affiliation with Universitas Sumatera Utara facilitated access to participants and enabled the sustained engagement with the research context that phenomenological inquiry requires.

Participants were purposefully selected using a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2016), designed to identify women whose experiences directly addressed the research questions rather than to produce a statistically representative sample. Purposive sampling is particularly appropriate for phenomenological research, where the goal is depth of understanding rather than range of generalisation, and where the analytical value of each participant lies in the richness and relevance of their experience rather than their representativeness of a broader population.

To be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) female, aged 20 years and above; (2) resident in Sumatera Utara

at the time of data collection; (3) actively engaged in professional, educational, or vocational life outside the domestic sphere; (4) self-identified as an independent woman, understood as exercising significant personal decision-making authority over major life domains without dependence on a male guardian or spouse; and (5) willing and able to reflect openly on their experiences of independence, autonomy, and societal pressure in the context of a recorded interview. The following exclusion criteria were applied: (1) women who did not self-identify as independent or who reported that major life decisions were made primarily by others on their behalf; (2) women currently residing outside Sumatera Utara; and (3) women who declined audio recording of the interview, as verbatim transcription was essential to the analytical process.

The concept of “independent woman” as operationalised in this study refers to women who demonstrate three or more of the following indicators of independence, drawn from de Beauvoir’s (1949/2010) framework of transcendence and from the broader feminist literature on women’s autonomy (Hermanto, 2019; Rajeswari et al., 2021b): (1) *economic independence*—managing personal finances and meeting living costs without dependence on a spouse or male family member; (2) *decision-making autonomy*—exercising self-directed authority over major life choices including education, career, residence, and child-rearing without requiring male approval; (3) *professional or educational engagement*—active participation in paid employment, formal education, or vocational training as a primary life pursuit; (4) *psychological self-determination*—a demonstrated capacity to define personal goals and values independently of conventional gender role expectations; and (5) *social navigation*—active negotiation of societal pressures and cultural expectations rather than passive conformity to them. All three participants in the final sample met at least four of these five indicators, confirming their suitability as research subjects.

The final sample of three participants was determined by the logic of phenomenological inquiry rather than by statistical power considerations. In phenomenological research, sample sizes of three to ten participants are widely regarded as appropriate, as the focus is on the quality and depth of experiential data rather than its quantity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). Three participants were deemed sufficient because each represented a meaningfully distinct life stage and social position; professional career woman, divorced single mother, and university student, enabling the study to illuminate the diversity of women’s experiences of independence across the life course while maintaining analytical depth. Data saturation, understood as the point at which new interviews ceased to generate substantively new thematic insights, was assessed iteratively during the analysis phase and confirmed across the three cases. The final sample consists of Dita, a lecturer at Universitas Sumatera Utara in her thirties. Ade, a single mother working as a teacher following divorce. Lastly, Dea, a university student pursuing a degree in engineering in her early twenties.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interview, a technique well-suited to phenomenological inquiry due to its capacity to balance thematic consistency with responsiveness to the particularities of individual experience (Newcomer et al., 2015). Interviews

were conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* to ensure participants could express themselves with maximum fluency and precision, and subsequently translated into English for reporting. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a location selected by the participant to ensure comfort and privacy. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. However, due to the unforeseen loss of the recording device, the original audio recordings and verbatim are unavailable. Findings are therefore presented as researcher-reconstructed accounts based on field notes and researcher collection of interview content. This limitation is acknowledged as a constraint on the evidentiary basis of the analysis and is addressed further in the conclusion.

The interview guideline was developed in two stages. First, a preliminary set of questions was constructed based on the theoretical framework and research objectives. Second, the guideline was piloted with one independent woman outside the final sample to assess clarity and relevance, and revised accordingly. The final interview guideline was organised into five thematic domains, each addressed through a primary question followed by two to three follow-up probes:

1. *Defining independence*: "How do you define independence in your own life?" / "In what areas of your life do you feel most independent?" / "Have your understanding of independence changed over time?"
2. *Professional and educational experience*: "Can you describe a situation in which you exercised independence in your professional or educational life?" / "What challenges did you encounter in asserting your independence in that context?" / "How did others respond?"
3. *Societal expectations and pressures*: "What kinds of expectations do you feel society places on you as a woman?" / "Have you ever felt pressured to make a decision based on what others expected rather than what you wanted?" / "How did that experience affect you?"
4. *Negotiation strategies*: "When your personal aspirations conflict with family or social expectations, how do you usually navigate that?" / "Can you give a specific example?" / "What helped you in that situation?"
5. *Psychological and emotional dimensions*: "How does navigating these pressures affect you emotionally?" / "Do you ever experience self-doubt about your choices as an independent woman?" / "What supports you in maintaining your independence?"

Follow-up probes were employed flexibly throughout each interview to explore unexpected themes and to deepen understanding of particularly significant experiences. Clarifying questions were used when participant responses required elaboration or when the interviewer sought to distinguish between a participant's description of events and their interpretation of those events.

Data were analysed through the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading

of transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes through systematic annotation of features relevant to the research questions; (3) searching for themes by gathering codes into candidate thematic groupings; (4) reviewing themes against the coded dataset and the full transcripts to ensure fit and coherence; (5) defining and naming themes to capture their essential quality; and (6) producing the report by selecting vivid and representative extracts and situating them within the broader analytical narrative. The four themes that emerged from this process, defining independence, societal pressures, negotiation strategies, and psychological impacts, are presented and discussed in the Results and Discussion section, where they are interpreted through de Beauvoir's (1949/2010) existentialist feminist framework.

To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, this study applied Lincoln and Guba's ((1985)) four criteria for qualitative rigour. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data and member checking, whereby key analytical findings were returned to participants for verification, clarification, and elaboration, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' own understandings. Transferability was addressed through the provision of thick description of the research context, participant profiles, and analytical process, enabling readers to assess the relevance and applicability of findings to comparable settings. Dependability was maintained through the construction of a systematic audit trail documenting all major analytical decisions, including the rationale for coding choices and thematic groupings. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive bracketing, in which both researchers explicitly acknowledged and documented their own assumptions, positional biases, and prior beliefs regarding gender norms, women's empowerment, and Indonesian cultural contexts, actively working to distinguish between their interpretations and participants' expressed meanings throughout the analytical process (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an analysis of interviews conducted with three women from different backgrounds in Sumatera Utara, Indonesia: Dita, a lecturer at Universitas Sumatera Utara; Ade, a single mother working as a teacher; and Dea, a university student in engineering. These participants were selected to represent different life stages, professional roles, and personal circumstances. They are collectively offering a broad and textured view of women's experiences of independence in contemporary Indonesia. Their narratives are organised into four related themes; the definition and meaning of independence, societal pressures that constrain it, strategies for negotiating between independence and external expectations, and psychological impacts of these negotiations. Afterwards, findings are interpreted through de Beauvoir's (2010) existentialist feminist framework, which illuminates how social norms are constructed and cultural expectations are operated as structural constraints on women's capacity for authentic self-determination.

Theme 1: Defining Independence: A Personal and Professional Exploration

For the three participants, independence was not experienced as a stable and achieved condition, but as an aspiration that remained perpetually subject to external control. Significantly, none of the three participants defined independence in abstract philosophical terms. Rather, they consistently articulated it through concrete experiences of wanting to pursue something and being prevented from doing so by family authority. This grounding of independence based on the denial permission, rather than in freedom already exercised, it provides important analytical insights. This suggests that for these women, independence is understood through its absence, namely as a condition that they desire but which has not been fully granted to them.

For Dita, independence was defined through a specific professional opportunity. It was an offer of employment in another city that would have required her to relocate away from her family.¹ Dita described how her parents refused to allow permission for this relocation. Her parents were expressing concern about the physical and social distance that migration would create between her and the family unit. In her story, this refusal was not framed by her parents as a denial of Dita professional ambitions, but as an expression of care and concern for her safety and closeness to family. This framing is significant. It illustrates the mechanism through which patriarchal constraint is frequently exercised not as explicit prohibition, but as protective concern. It is a mode of control that is difficult to challenge precisely because it is expressed through the language of love and familial duty. De Beauvoir (2010, p. 814) identifies this as a characteristic feature of oppression. This situation reflects what de Beauvoir identifies as a structural feature of women's professional lives, "whether the woman lives with her family or is married, her friends and family will rarely respect. Her efforts as they respect's a man's; they will impose duties and chores on her, and curtail her freedom." The restriction of women's freedom is rarely presented, but is consistently justified through discourses of protection, care, and the natural order of family relations.

Dea experience independence. She similarly centred on the question of geographical mobility. Her primary aspiration, to pursue a degree in engineering at a university in another city, was met with resistance from her father, who expressed the view that women do not need to travel far from home to study.² Dea described her father's position as rooted not in opposition to her choice, but in the gendered principle. Her father said that women's proper place is close to the family home. The engineering ambition itself was tolerable, but the desire to leave family home was not. This distinction is analytically important. The constraint that Dea faced was not primarily disciplinary (about what women can study) but spatial and relational (about where women should be and to whom they should remain proximate). Her understanding of independence was thus shaped by this spatial logic, independence meant. As de Bouvoir writes, the "curse on the woman vassal is that she is not allowed to anything (2010, p. 813); her freedom

¹ Personal Interview, Dita, 3 September 2024.

² Personal Interview, Dea, 5 September 2024.

is defined by its limits rather than its possibilities. Above all, the freedom to move, to inhabit a wider world, a freedom that her father's authority restricted.

Ade's relationship to independence was defined through a different but equally revealing lens. The experience of having made her own decision, to end her marriage and become a single mother, and having to live with the social consequences from that choice.³ For Ade, independence was not primarily about geographical movement or professional opportunity but about the right to make important personal decisions without being subjected to social collective judgment. De Beauvoir (2010, p. 966) argues that for women, "refusing to be the Other, refusing involvement with man, mean rejecting all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them" — and that this is why so many women do not refuse. Her account of independence was thus reflective and defensive. She had exercised independence, and the social response to that exercise constituted the primary challenge she faced. Together, these three informants illuminate a consistent pattern. To them, independence is fundamentally understood as the right to make and act on one's own decisions. It is a right that is experienced as conditional, contested, and unevenly available by gender.

Theme 2: Societal Pressures, Impacting Independence

The societal pressures experienced by all three participants converged on a similar structural dynamic. The notion that women bear greater burden of restriction, prohibition, and judgment that is systematically heavier than faced by males, and that this is inequality is viewed as natural and legitimate by both family and society. All three participants, in different ways, voiced the existence of the double standard, an awareness that the freedoms routinely granted to men are denied to women on the basis of gender.

Dita⁴ and Dea⁵ both described a pattern in which permission to pursue professional or educational opportunities outside the family home was withheld on the basis of gender. In both cases, the participants were aware that brothers or male peers faced no comparable restriction. Men were permitted to migrate for work or study as a matter of course, while the same mobility was treated as problematic, even dangerous, when desired by women. Both participants experienced the awareness of gender-based inequality. The fact that the same aspirations elicit different responses depending on whether they are voiced by a man or a woman, not mererly as a personal frustration, but as a reflection of broader social logic that confines women's scope of action to realms deemed appropriate. This awareness corresponds directly to what de Beauvoir (2010, p. 815) identifies as the foundational asymmetry of women's professional situation: "the advantage man enjoys and which manifests itself from childhood onward is that his vocation as a human being in no way contradicts his destiny as a male," while for a woman, "to accomplish her femininity, she is required to be object and prey; that is, she must renounce her claims as a

³ Personal Interview, Ade, 4 September 2024.

⁴ Personal Interview, Dita, 3 September 2024.

⁵ Personal Interview, Dea, 5 September 2024.

sovereign subject.” Men are culturally positioned as subjects entitled to move through and act upon the world, while women are positioned as objects whose proper place is defined by proximity to family and the domestic sphere.

Ade’s experience of societal pressure took a distinctly different but equally gendered form. As a single mother, Ade found herself subject to social judgment from her community, particularly from older members of her social network, who characterised her decision to end her marriage as impulsive and morally questionable.⁶ She recounted being told that she had been too hasty, that she had lacked the patience required of a good wife. This judgment, she reflected, was applied specifically and disproportionately to women in her position. She was acutely aware that a man who ended a marriage under comparable circumstances would not face the same degree of social censure. Ade described this awareness using language that conveyed a sense of humiliation, a feeling that the status of single mother carried a social stigma that had no male comparable, that being a single mother was treated as shameful. However, being a single father simply was not. This observation is consistent with what de Beauvoir (2010, p. 966) identifies as the differential application of moral standards to men and women. Women who deviate from normative femininity, defined centrally through marital fidelity, patience, and domestic perseverance, are subjected to social judgment in ways that men are not. Ade’s acute awareness of this asymmetry reflects a form of feminist consciousness that de Beauvoir would recognise as the beginning of transcendence. The capacity to perceive the constructed and arbitrary character of the norms that constrain one’s freedom, rather than accepting them as natural or inevitable. Hochschild (1989) similarly documents how women bear disproportionate burdens of emotional and social accountability that their male counterparts do not face, and Ade’s experience represents a culturally specific instance of this broader structural pattern.

Theme 3: Negotiating Between Independence and Societal Expectations

Perhaps the most analytically significant finding concerns the strategies or, more precisely, the absence of active resistance strategies, those participants employed in response to the pressures they faced. In both Dita’s and Dea’s cases, the response to parental restriction was ultimately one of acceptance and compliance rather than contestation or negotiation. Neither participant described a sustained attempt to change her parents’ position through argument of her own rights. Instead, both described a form of resigned acceptance grounded in a felt obligation of familial piety.

Dita described her acceptance of her parents’ refusal as a decision to prioritise familial duty over personal ambition.⁷ She did not frame this as a defeat or as an unjust imposition, but as an expression of her own values. She believed that children, and daughters in particular, should remain obedient to parental authority. This framing, in which compliance is presented

⁶ Personal Interview, Ade, 4 September 2024.

⁷ Personal Interview, Dita, 3 September 2024.

not as external compulsion but as a personally held value, exemplifies precisely what de Beauvoir (2010, p. 979) describes as bad faith; the internalisation of an external constraint as a freely chosen moral commitment. The deep complicity that makes women's oppression so difficult to dismantle: "woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as Other." Dita's compliance represents the successful operation of a cultural norm that restricts women's mobility by encoding obedience to parental authority as a feminine virtue.

Dea's response to her father's restriction was similarly characterised by acceptance rather than resistance.⁸ Like Dita, she expressed an unwillingness to challenge parental authority directly. This framing her compliance as a reflection of her respect for her father rather than as a capitulation to an unjust obligation. Her account suggests that she was aware of the tension between her own aspirations and her father's expectations, but that this awareness did not translate into active negotiation or challenge (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 830). This pattern of compliance, in which awareness of restriction does not produce active resistance, is consistent with how patriarchal authority operates in Indonesian family structures. Through the cultivation of filial deference as a moral value, making resistance feel not like the assertion of a right but like a moral transgression (Hermanto, 2019).

Ade's position in relation to negotiation was different in character, as her primary decision had already been made and could not be undone.⁹ De Beauvoir (2010, p. 813) argues that it is through work and economic independence that women most concretely assert their transcendence: "it is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom." Her negotiation with societal pressure took the form not of resisting restriction, but of managing judgment after the fact. Continuing to live according to her own values in the face of social disapproval, without either fully internalising the criticism directed at her to publicly refute it. Her maintenance of her own course of action in the face of sustained social pressure represents, in de Beauvoirian terms, a form of persisting transcendence; an insistence on her own subjecthood against the social pressure to accept the judgments of others as authoritative (Rajeswari et al., 2021).

Theme 4: The Psychological Impact of Societal Pressures

The psychological dimensions of the three participants' experiences reflect the emotional costs of navigating gendered restriction and social judgment in a cultural environment that treats women's autonomy as conditional. These costs manifest differently across the three participants but share a common character that they are the predictable consequences of living within a social order. It consistently treats women's aspirations as subordinate to familial and social expectations.

⁸ Personal Interview, Dea, 5 September 2024.

⁹ Personal Interview, Ade, 4 September 2024.

Dita¹⁰ and Dea¹¹ both described experiences of frustrated aspiration; the psychological state of wanting something, being prevented from having it, and accepting that prevention as legitimate. De Beauvoir (2010, p. 830) describes this dynamic with particular clarity in her analysis of the independent woman's situation. She explains that the woman "goes forward, not with her eye fixed on a goal directly in front of her, but letting her attention wander all around her; thus, her progress is timid and uncertain." This form of experience, resigned frustration, involves an awareness of what one is missing combined with a moral framework that makes it difficult to fully claim the right to what one has been denied. The repeated experience in which one's aspirations are sidelined by parental authority, on the basis of gender, result in the gradual erosion of self-belief regarding the right to pursue one's own life goals. Hochschild (1989) documents the emotional labour that women expend in managing the gap between their own aspirations and the social expectations that constrain them. Dita and Dea's experiences represent a form of this labour, in which the work of accommodation is experienced not as oppression but as moral responsibility.

Ade's psychological experience was dominated by the experience of stigma and social humiliation.¹² Her account of being judged by older members of her community for her decision to end her marriage, and her awareness that this judgment was applied to her as a woman in a way it would not have been applied to a man in a comparable situation, carried a strong emotional feeling. She described this experience using language that conveyed a sense of being dishonoured, of having her status as a person diminished by her status as a single mother in a social environment that treated that status as a mark of failure rather than as an expression of autonomous decision-making. De Beauvoir (2010, p. 978) identifies this mechanism with precision: the woman who refuses complicity with the social order, who exercises her freedom rather than accepting the role of Other. "It eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help" but pays the cost of social isolation and judgment. Ade's experience of being dishonoured by her status as a single mother is not an incidental consequence of personal choices; it is the socially predictable response to a woman who has exercised transcendence in a domain where immanence is most insistently demanded.

Collectively, the psychological experiences of all three participants illuminate a structural dynamic that extends far beyond their individual biographies. De Beauvoir (2010, p. 1273) poses the question at the heart of this study with characteristic directness: "how can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women's freedom and can she overcome them?" The experiences of Dita, Ade, and Dea suggest that in the Sumatera Utara context, the circumstances that limit women's freedom are powerful and deeply internalised: they operate not only through explicit prohibition but through the cultivation of familial piety, the stigmatisation of autonomous decision-making, and the gendered double standard that treats

¹⁰ Personal Interview, Dita, 3 September 2024.

¹¹ Personal Interview, Dea, 5 September 2024.

¹² Personal Interview, Ade, 4 September 2024.

women's aspirations as subordinate to family obligation. Addressing these circumstances requires not merely the cultivation of individual resilience, though all three participants demonstrate considerable resilience, but cultural and structural transformation that re-defines women's transcendence as a social good rather than a social threat. As Azizah (2023) argues, achieving genuine gender equality in Indonesia requires a deeper transformation of the cultural values and mental frameworks through which gender norms are reproduced across generations.

E. CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the resilience, resourcefulness, and determination of three independent women in Indonesia as they navigate the complex intersections of personal autonomy, societal expectations, and cultural norms. Each participant, Dita, a career-driven academic; Ade, a single mother and teacher; and Dea, an engineering student, demonstrates through her specific biography that independence is a multi-layered concept whose meaning is profoundly shaped by individual aspirations, social position, and life circumstance. Despite significant and well-documented advances in women's educational achievement and professional participation in Indonesia, traditional expectations surrounding marriage, femininity, and familial roles continue to impose substantial constraints on women's autonomy, creating a persistent and consequential gap between the formal rights guaranteed by Indonesian law and the lived realities of women's daily experience.

Interpreted through de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework, the experiences documented across these three cases reveal a persistent and structurally reproduced tension between immanence and transcendence. Each participant faces ongoing social pressure to accept an immanent, domestically defined identity; to prioritise marriage, motherhood, and conformity to conventional femininity over professional achievement, intellectual development, and self-determination. Yet each also exercises varying degrees of transcendence, asserting her subjecthood through the daily practice of professional authority, independent parenting decisions, and educational ambition. The psychological costs of this resistance; frustration, isolation, self-doubt, and the exhausting labour of managing social disapproval, are not individual failings but structural symptoms of a cultural order that continues to treat women's autonomy as conditional on its compatibility with conventional feminine roles.

The policy implications of these findings are significant. Individual acts of resilience, however admirable, are insufficient to address constraints that are structural in character. What is required alongside the celebration of women's individual agency is systemic intervention: policies that support women's economic independence through fair labour conditions, accessible childcare, and equal pay; educational initiatives that challenge gender stereotypes from an early age and encourage girls to pursue aspirations across all fields; and cultural programmes that create space for diverse models of womanhood beyond the marital and maternal ideal. The experiences of Dita, Ade, and Dea suggest that Indonesian women possess the aspiration and

the capacity for independence; what they require is an environment that supports rather than penalises its exercise.

The limitations of this study include its small purposive sample and its focus on participants from one regional context in Sumatera Utara, which means that findings cannot be straightforwardly generalised across the diverse cultural, religious, ethnic, and socio-economic landscape of Indonesia. Future research should be built on by employing larger and more geographically diverse samples; incorporating intersectional analysis to examine how class, ethnicity, religion, and rurality shape women's experience of independence in differentiated ways; and engaging with quantitative methods to assess the prevalence and distribution of the pressures and strategies documented here. Longitudinal research tracking the same participants over time would also enrich understanding of how women's negotiations with independence evolve across the life course, and how changes in policy and cultural context alter the conditions within which independence is pursued. A further limitation concerns the loss of original audio recordings due to unforeseen circumstances, which precluded the use of verbatim quotations in the presentation of findings. Future research should ensure redundant data storage protocols to safeguard against such loss.

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