

Cultural-Religious Synergy in Gender-Responsive Education: A Qualitative Study of the Hukurila Indigenous Community in Maluku

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how cultural traditions and religious values intersect with gender-responsive education to shape family well-being in indigenous Maluku communities, focusing on Hukurila village in Ambon. While gender-responsive education is central to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 5: Gender Equality), patriarchal norms continue to limit women's access to education, particularly in entrepreneurship and leadership, with minimal family engagement in promoting gender equity. The research addresses how cultural-religious synergy can support inclusive education in this context. Using a qualitative descriptive approach within the sociology of education and gender studies, data were collected through in-depth interviews with youth, women, customary leaders, religious leaders, and local authorities; participatory observation; and analysis of local documents and church programs. Thematic analysis explored how communities construct gender equality through cultural and religious frameworks. Findings reveal tensions between patriarchal traditions and gender agendas. The "tiga batutungku" (government, customary, and religious leaders) act ambivalently, while local wisdom, such as badraheng, offers potential for inclusive education. Church family programs further demonstrate the capacity to shift paradigms toward equitable family well-being. The novelty lies in advancing the concept of cultural-religious synergy as a framework for gender-responsive education in indigenous contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-responsive education has increasingly attracted widespread attention in global development discourse, particularly since the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which place quality education (Goal 4) and gender equality (Goal 5) at the center of the agenda (Khalifa & Scarparo, 2021; Uduji & Okolo-Obasi, 2022). However, field realities indicate that implementing these global agendas often faces significant challenges, especially when interacting with Indigenous communities that maintain distinct systems of values, norms, and social structures (Wei et al., 2024). In the context of Indigenous Maluku communities, particularly in Hukurila Village, there is a tension between traditional norms, religious values, and modern policies that promote gender equality (Manuputty et al., 2024b). This dynamic has produced a paradox: on the one hand,

there is global and national commitment to gender inclusivity in education, while on the other, patriarchal social norms continue to limit women's mobility, both in terms of educational access and participation in broader public spheres, including entrepreneurship and leadership (Afdhal, 2023).

The limited access of women in Indigenous Maluku communities is not solely caused by economic factors but is also deeply shaped by social constructions that rigidly define gender roles. Women are often positioned as guardians of family harmony but are not always given opportunities to participate in public decision-making (Manuputty et al., 2023). This has direct implications for family well-being, as the exclusion of women from educational access and leadership reduces households' collective capacity to address contemporary socio-economic challenges. Family involvement in promoting gender perspectives within education remains minimal, resulting in the continued reproduction of patriarchal norms across generations.

Amidst this dynamic, the local social structure known as the "*tiga batutungku*" (tiga batu tungku), comprising village government, customary leaders, and religious leaders, plays a strategic role. These three pillars are regarded as guardians of balance within Indigenous society (Manuputty et al., 2024a). Yet, in practice, their roles have not been fully optimized to support gender equality. More often, they reproduce traditional norms that reinforce gender hierarchies. Nevertheless, there is significant potential to reconstruct their roles through synergistic approaches that integrate local cultural wisdom and religious values. One such cultural wisdom, *badraheng*, holds potential as an instrument for gender-responsive education, although it has thus far been largely understood as a symbolic tradition rather than as a pedagogical foundation.

Academic studies on the relationship between education, gender, culture, and religion have been extensive, though with diverse emphases and contexts. For example, Engdahl & Furu (2022) and Wignall et al. (2023) highlight the importance of education as a space for gender transformation, while also cautioning that local contexts often become the primary barrier to realising equality. Buchel et al. (2021) and Rubin (2025) demonstrate that religion plays a dual role: it can serve as a source of legitimacy for inequality, yet it can also be an emancipatory force when interpreted in a progressive manner. In studies of Indigenous communities, da Silva et al. (2024) and Muslim (2021) emphasise that formal education often clashes with customary practices that prioritise collectivist values. In Indonesia, research by Hyunanda et al. (2021), Malilang (2024), and Purnamasari (2024) highlights the construction of "state ibuisim," which also shapes how women's roles are understood, even within Indigenous communities.

Furthermore, scholarship on the role of religion in social transformation shows that religious institutions often serve as important actors in shaping family educational values (Indriyani Ma'rifah & Sibawaihi, 2023; Judijanto et al., 2024; Masdul et al., 2024). Jatmiko et al. (2025) find that churches in Eastern Indonesia play a strategic role in fostering gender awareness, though the implementation varies across local leadership. Other studies by Lopulalan et al. (2024) and Matakena et al. (2024) reveal that Maluku communities have a long tradition of integrating customary and religious values, indicating substantial potential to promote gender-inclusive education. However, the existing literature seldom explores how integrating culture and religion can concretely shape gender-responsive family educational practices.

In the context of family education, recent studies underscore the importance of family well-being as an indicator of educational success. McQuillan & Leininger (2023) and Smith & Bamberger (2021) note that gender-inclusive family education contributes to the psychosocial well-being of family members. Meanwhile, Elsalam (2023) and Ryan et al. (2023) emphasise the close link between women's empowerment in education and family economic well-being. Yet, these studies largely focus on urban or modern societies and thus do not fully address how such dynamics unfold in Indigenous communities that remain deeply rooted in traditional values.

The limitations of prior research create an opening to explore how the concept of cultural-religious synergy can be translated into gender-responsive education within Indigenous Maluku. Studies on the role of the *tiga batutungku*, for instance, often remain at the structural level of analysis, without connecting to the concrete experiences of families in building gender-equitable well-being. Similarly, examinations of local wisdom, such as *badraheng*, have tended to treat it as a marker of identity rather than as an educational resource capable of challenging patriarchy. The same can be observed in studies on churches in Maluku, which largely emphasise spiritual and social roles while paying limited attention to their contribution in shaping gender awareness within families.

Accordingly, this study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the integration of culture, religion, and education within a gender-responsive framework for family well-being. Instead of viewing culture and religion as obstacles to equality, this research highlights their synergistic potential in supporting more inclusive family education. A sociological perspective on education and gender is employed to examine how communities construct meanings of equality through everyday cultural and religious practices, and how these meanings can facilitate a shift away from patriarchal paradigms. The primary aim of this research is to understand the conditions of gender-equal access to education in Indigenous Hukurila, to examine the role of the *tiga batutungku* in promoting gender-just education, to trace the role of local wisdom, such as *badraheng*, in strengthening inclusivity, and to analyse the contribution of religion, particularly the family programs of the Protestant Church of Maluku, in fostering gender-equitable family well-being. With this focus, the study contributes not only to academic literature on education, gender, and Indigenous communities but also offers a practical model of gender-responsive education rooted in local wisdom and religion. Such a model is expected to be replicable in other Indigenous communities in Indonesia and the Pacific region, thereby holding significance not only for advancing the social sciences but also for policy formulation and local community empowerment.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method, given that the research questions centre on meaning, interpretation, and lived experience, namely, how communities construct understandings of gender equality at the intersection of culture and religion, and how these processes resonate with family well-being. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables a “thick description” of everyday cultural and religious practices, while also amplifying the voices of groups that are often marginalised in education policy discourse (Levitt et al., 2021; Muurlink & Thomsen, 2024). Hukurila, a customary village in Ambon City, was purposively selected for its unique configuration of the “*tiga batutungku*” (traditional governance, customary leaders, and religious leaders), the presence of the local value of *badraheng* embedded in ritual practices, and its institutional connection with the family programs of the Protestant Church of Maluku (GPM). This site represents a context where tensions between patriarchal norms and gender equality agendas are visibly enacted, while also offering opportunities to observe cultural–religious synergy in family education practices.

Informants were determined through purposive and snowball sampling to capture variations in experience and positions of power relevant to the research theme (Doyle et al., 2020). A total of 30 informants were interviewed until data saturation was reached: 10 women (single, married, and female heads of households) to explore access, barriers, and strategies of agency; 6 youth (male and female, aged 16–24) to examine the generational transmission of values; 6 customary leaders representing soa/clans and engaged in traditional decision-making; 4 religious leaders (pastors/elders of GPM) responsible for initiating or leading family programs; and 4 village officials (Raja/secretary of the village/saniri members) with authority over local regulations. This composition was designed to ensure that the data encompass micro-level experiences (family), meso-level decision-making (local institutions), and macro-level frameworks (cultural–religious values).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes per session, were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or Ambonese Malay according to the informant's preference, were recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim. Questions were semi-structured to allow reflective and contextual narratives, while ensuring thematic consistency across informants (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Leavy, 2022). Participant observation was conducted during educational and family activities (e.g., church family meetings, child learning support, entrepreneurship training), customary/saniri meetings, and rituals that express *badraheng* values. Field notes captured situational descriptions, interactions, and researcher reflections. Document analysis included village archives, customary regulations, saniri meeting minutes, GPM family program guidelines, and local formal education documents, linking discourse practices with policy and regulatory traces.

Data were analysed using an iterative and reflexive thematic analysis (de Villiers et al., 2022; Susanto et al., 2024). The steps included familiarisation with transcripts and field notes, line-by-line initial coding, clustering codes into provisional themes (e.g., ambivalence of the “*tiga batutungku*,” reinterpretation of *badraheng*, the role of family liturgy), reviewing themes against raw data, and naming and defining conceptually coherent themes. The process was supported by reflective memos to maintain an audit trail of analytic decisions and ensure transparency (Priya, 2021). The validity of findings was strengthened through source triangulation (comparing narratives of women, youth, customary leaders, religious leaders, and village officials), methodological triangulation (interviews–observation–documents), and researcher triangulation by involving a peer reviewer as a second coder to check consistency of codes and themes, with differences discussed until argumentative consensus was reached (Natow, 2020; Schlunegger et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tensions Between Patriarchal Norms and the Gender Equality Agenda

In the context of the Hukurila customary community, patriarchy exists not only as a legacy of values but also as a social structure that continues to regulate interpersonal relations, particularly in the division of roles between men and women. Field findings reveal that patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched, limiting women’s opportunities to pursue higher education, occupy leadership positions, or develop economic enterprises. Women are often positioned as household caretakers and child-rearers, while men are more closely associated with public spheres, authority, and decision-making. Although national policies and global commitments encourage gender equality, everyday practices indicate barriers that force women to negotiate with entrenched norms.

In an interview with a young woman pseudonymized as N, she admitted that her aspiration to continue university studies in Ambon was not fully supported by her family. Her parents encouraged her instead to marry after finishing high school, reasoning that “a good woman should not pursue too much education because then no one would want to marry her.” This narrative illustrates how patriarchal logic restricts women’s aspirations early on, even when formal access to education is available. A similar perspective was expressed by a young man, F, who noted that his younger sister was frequently asked to help with household chores rather than study, while he himself was encouraged to attend church leadership training. Such differentiated treatment reflects how customary structures and daily practices continue to rigidly assign gender roles.

During a customary meeting attended by community leaders and youth, nearly all male participants occupied the central circle of discussion, while women were relegated to the margins of the room, serving food. When the discussion turned to youth education, women’s voices were excluded altogether. Some whispered among themselves, but no opportunity was provided to speak in the official forum. This illustrates that while women may be physically present in public spaces, their participation remains constrained, both symbolically and practically.

This phenomenon can be understood through Strazzeri’s (2024) notion that gender is not a fixed biological category but a social construct continuously produced through interactions, institutions, and cultural practices. In Hukurila, gender construction is maintained through customary structures, value transmission systems, and religious practices, which are often interpreted conservatively. Yet such constructions are not static; they hold potential to be contested and renegotiated. Several women, particularly younger women, have begun to develop subtle resistance strategies such as continuing their education while simultaneously meeting family expectations for domestic duties. For instance, one informant, M, shared that although she helped her mother prepare daily meals, she also took online courses in entrepreneurship. Such practices show that women are not entirely passive but actively seek openings for self-development within tightly prescribed norms.

This condition intersects with global dynamics advanced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality. This global agenda urges member states, including Indonesia, to ensure equal access for women to education, leadership, and economic opportunities. Yet in Hukurila, implementation encounters value conflicts. For example, women’s empowerment programs introduced by local government are often resisted at the community level, perceived as disruptive to customary harmony. Some customary leaders argue that women who are too active outside the home may “forget their primary duty of maintaining the family.” This reflects how global policies directly clash with local logics that sustain patriarchy as an ideal norm.

Nevertheless, spaces for negotiation are emerging. Younger generations, both male and female, tend to question inherited gender roles. In an interview, a young man named R stated that he felt it was unfair that his younger sister was prepared only to become a wife and mother while he was granted the freedom to pursue higher education. He admitted to discussing the importance of equality within families with his peers. This statement signals a slow but significant discursive shift, wherein segments of youth are beginning to challenge traditional gender constructions.

Observations of church-based family activities reveal similar dynamics. In small-group discussions facilitated by the church, some women emphasized the importance of girls' education, noting that education is not only about securing employment but also about improving family quality of life. While these views are not universally accepted, church forums provide a space for women to articulate aspirations. This indicates that religious spaces can function as alternative arenas for renegotiating gender relations.

Thus, tensions between patriarchal norms and the gender equality agenda in Hukurila are not simply a clash of opposing poles. Rather, they constitute a site of negotiation where individuals, families, and institutions interact to produce new meanings of gender roles. This aligns with [Barnard & Woodburn's \(2024\)](#) view that while social structures exert powerful reproductive effects, they also open opportunities for resistance and transformation. In Hukurila, resistance strategies often do not take the form of overt confrontation but are enacted through subtle practices, such as pursuing further education, enrolling in online courses, or utilizing church forums to voice opinions.

Ultimately, these tensions illustrate a paradox. On one hand, patriarchal norms remain the primary determinant of gender roles, constraining women's access to education, leadership, and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, global agendas such as the SDGs, combined with individual resistance, open pathways for transformation. The constraints faced by women in Hukurila thus not only expose tangible gender gaps but also highlight the adaptive resilience of customary communities in engaging with new values.

The Ambivalent Role of the *Tiga Batutungku* (Three Stone Furnaces) in Gender-Responsive Education

Within the Hukurila customary community in Ambon, the *tiga batutungku* comprising village governance, customary leaders, and religious leaders hold highly significant roles in shaping social practices, including gender-responsive education. These three entities are often regarded as the moral, social, and political authorities in daily life. Yet findings reveal deep ambivalence: formally, they accept and even endorse gender equality-oriented education programs, but in practice their decisions, actions, and discourses frequently reproduce patriarchal norms. This resonates with [Calla et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Vorbach & Ensor \(2022\)](#), who emphasize that local institutions are not homogeneous entities but arenas laden with contradictions, simultaneously capable of fostering change and obstructing social transformation.

A young informant in Hukurila explained that while village authorities often approve women's or youth training programs initiated by external organizations, in customary meetings, women's voices remain largely disregarded. This shows a formal openness to equality discourses, yet, substantively, practices remain bound by patriarchal logic. Village governance appears to occupy a compromise position: on the one hand, signaling openness to development programs aligned with national and global agendas, such as the SDGs, while, on the other hand, preserving legitimacy with customary leaders who uphold traditional social structures.

Customary leaders play a somewhat different role. Observations at a customary ceremony in Hukurila revealed how gender roles are reaffirmed through symbols and rituals. Women were positioned as complements, responsible for event logistics and food preparation, while men dominated decision-making forums. One female informant, Mrs. M, noted that although she possessed knowledge and experience in education, she was never invited to contribute during customary meetings. This underscores how customary authority remains a stronghold of patriarchal reproduction. While customary leaders recognize the importance of children's schooling, they tend to adhere to traditional narratives that position women in the domestic sphere.

In contrast, religious leaders, particularly from the local church, demonstrated more progressive tendencies. Through family programs emphasizing child education and women's empowerment, the church played an important role in shifting community perspectives on gender roles. An informant, Mr. R, active in church service, explained that the church seeks to promote equality between men and women as part of teachings on love and shared family responsibility.

Observations during church activities also showed that women were granted opportunities to share perspectives, an occurrence rarely seen in customary forums. However, even within the religious domain, resistance persists: some senior church leaders still view women's education as supplementary rather than as a pathway to equal leadership with men.

This ambivalent condition reflects the tug-of-war between the demands of modernity and global development agendas on the one hand, and local power structures rooted in tradition on the other. The concept of ambivalent governance helps explain that institutions such as village authorities, customary leaders, and religious leaders cannot be interpreted in binary terms. They are not merely agents of patriarchy or transformation but operate between these poles. In Hukurila, village authorities, for instance, stand at the crossroads between embracing national policy interventions on gender equality and safeguarding local traditions emphasizing gender hierarchy. Customary leaders act as strongholds of patriarchy, yet may serve as entry points if local values such as *badraheng* are reinterpreted as foundations for inclusive education. Religious leaders, although relatively more progressive, still face internal challenges in balancing theological teachings with social practices that remain patriarchal.

Field observations further revealed that these three actors often share space in joint forums involving village governance, the church, and customary structures. In such arenas, the dynamics become evident: village authorities seek compromise, customary leaders assert tradition, and religious leaders inject equality discourses. Yet outcomes often lean toward compromises favoring the status quo. This highlights the importance of analyzing local power relations, as formal policy changes do not automatically alter social practices unless accompanied by transformations in relational structures.

The ambivalent role of the *tiga batutungku* in gender-responsive education in Hukurila reflects the complexity of balancing global norms with local traditions. Theoretically, this underscores the relevance of Dore's (2023) perspective that local governance is an arena of negotiation filled with contradictions, where local agents can simultaneously act as recipients of gender equality programs and as guardians of patriarchy. Empirically, this study shows that such ambivalence not only creates obstacles but also opens new spaces for negotiation. For instance, the church can function as a safe space for introducing values of equality, which may gradually influence customary practices and village governance decisions.

Reinterpretation of Badraheng as a Local Narrative for Gender-Inclusive Education

In the Hukurila community, the *badraheng* tradition holds a significant position as a cultural symbol that emphasizes togetherness and collective identity. Initially, *badraheng* was understood primarily as a symbolic practice associated with social and customary rituals. It was often treated as a marker of harmony and balance within the community. However, field research indicates that this tradition has substantial potential for reinterpretation, shifting from a purely symbolic practice to a foundation for family education that is more gender-inclusive. This reinterpretation serves as an important pathway to articulate a local narrative aligned with gender equality agendas without severing ties with cultural roots.

In an interview with a young man, anonymized as R., he argued that *badraheng* essentially teaches justice. According to him, justice is not only about distributing roles among families or clans, but can also be understood as the principle of balance between men and women within both family and society. Such perspectives are increasingly found among younger generations in Hukurila who are more receptive to gender equality discourses, facilitated by access to education and interactions with the outside world. This reflects that *badraheng* is not rigid, but rather a tradition open to reinterpretation in response to contemporary challenges.

Field observations also reveal early signs of changing perspectives. During a community event involving children and parents, *badraheng* was represented through collective labor (*gotong royong*). Men and women participated equally in event preparations. Whereas in the past women were confined to kitchen-related tasks, several young women were now involved in technical arrangements, while some men voluntarily helped with catering. Such small changes demonstrate how the same tradition can yield new meanings when younger generations reinterpret inherited symbols.

Another perspective emerged in an interview with a progressive religious leader, anonymized as P. He explained that *badraheng* can be understood as a call to live in balance, including gender

relations. According to him, if the community allows one party to dominate, the core value of harmony within *badraheng* is lost. He further emphasized that both the church and the family should actively foster this understanding, as gender-responsive education does not contradict tradition but rather actualizes the noble values inherited from ancestors.

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be understood through Järvelä's (2023) concept of *cultural resilience and adaptation*, which asserts that indigenous communities possess the capacity to reconstruct local wisdom so that it remains relevant to contemporary challenges, including gender equality. Culture is not static; it is an entity continuously in motion, reproduced and negotiated by social actors in specific contexts. Within this framework, *badraheng* should not merely be seen as a traditional heritage to be preserved in its original form, but as a transformative resource that can serve as a foundation for gender-inclusive education in Hukurila.

In everyday practice, reinterpretations of *badraheng* also emerge in informal discussion spaces. Several youths, as described by another informant, anonymized as L., believe that this tradition should be invoked to challenge injustices that persist in household relations. He noted that many women in Hukurila possess intellectual and economic capacities but remain constrained by traditional norms. If *badraheng* emphasizes balance, then restricting women contradicts the value itself. Such perspectives illustrate how younger generations are engaging in symbolic negotiations over cultural heritage.

Further observation of customary meetings reveals tensions between older and younger generations. On one hand, customary elders still articulate *badraheng* through traditional narratives that reinforce gender hierarchy. On the other hand, youths and progressive leaders are beginning to embed new, more inclusive interpretations. They do not reject tradition outright, but instead reinterpret harmony as unachievable without equality. This was evident in a forum discussing women's roles in customary events: elders maintained that women's primary role was supportive and behind the scenes, while several youths intervened, reminding the group that balance requires all parties to participate fairly.

These dynamics clearly demonstrate that *badraheng* functions as a contested arena of meaning. It can remain a bulwark of patriarchy, but it can also be reinterpreted as a local narrative that supports gender-inclusive education. This process of reinterpretation is tangible proof that culture is never static but constantly evolves through social negotiation. In this way, *badraheng* can serve as a bridge between tradition and contemporary agendas of social transformation.

This analysis shows that gender-responsive education at the local level does not necessarily have to rely on external frameworks; rather, it can be constructed upon reinterpreted local values. The reinterpretation of *badraheng* offers a humanistic approach, as it does not erase tradition but expands its meaning to remain relevant for present generations. Such strategies are also more acceptable to local communities, as they rely on familiar symbols with strong cultural legitimacy.

The Role of the Church in Shifting Patriarchal Paradigms toward Equal Family Well-Being

In Maluku, particularly within the Protestant Church of Maluku (*Gereja Protestan Maluku*, GPM), the church plays an increasingly significant role in shifting patriarchal paradigms toward more equal and just family relations. This role is manifested through a variety of family programs systematically designed to address everyday aspects of life, ranging from childcare practices and children's education to the enhancement of women's participation in social and spiritual spaces. Within church spaces, ideas of equality often deemed taboo in customary domains or even domestic relations find safe ground for expression, discussion, and practice. In the Hukurila context, the church functions not only as a religious institution but also as a moral and social agent promoting gender transformation, aligning with Wilk-Mhagama's (2022) notion of *faith-based* gender justice, which views religious institutions as strategic arenas for gender-equitable social change.

Research findings show that through family ministry programs, the church emphasizes the importance of equality in childcare. A female informant, anonymized as YR, explained that in church family meetings, mothers are encouraged to share experiences about creating more equitable divisions of household responsibilities. According to her, these discussions prompted some fathers to begin participating, albeit at early stages such as taking children to school or preparing breakfast on weekends. This indicates a small but significant shift in family relations, where previously the entire domestic burden fell on women. This was further reinforced through field observations: in a family worship gathering, a father was seen guiding his child in memorizing weekly verses,

contrasting with traditional patterns where children were guided solely by mothers. The father's presence symbolized how the church facilitates transformations in gender norms within households.

Beyond childcare, the church also contributes to building collective awareness of the importance of girls' education. In outreach sessions organized by the family ministry unit, several church leaders emphasized that investing in girls' education benefits not only the individual but also the well-being of families and communities. This aligns with the faith-based gender justice perspective, which employs moral and spiritual language to frame equality not merely as a human right but also as a faith imperative (Thomsen, 2022; Wilk-Mhagama, 2022). A local church leader, anonymized as AM, stated in an interview that girls' education is increasingly seen as a collective responsibility rather than an optional choice. He added that the church intentionally incorporates this issue into weekly sermons so that the moral message reaches fathers, mothers, and the congregation at large.

The church's power as an agent of change is evident in its ability to provide safe spaces for women to articulate aspirations for equality. In an interview, a young female congregant, anonymized as LM, said that in the church youth fellowship, they felt more empowered to voice critical views about unfair gender role distributions. The church space gave them moral legitimacy to speak, unlike customary domains where women's voices are more restricted. Field observations confirmed this: in a prayer fellowship, a mother openly declared the need for husbands' support in childcare, and other congregants nodded in agreement. Such moments illustrate how the church functions as a catalyst for women to break free from patriarchal constraints, even though full transformation still requires time and sustained effort.

Nevertheless, the church's role is not free of challenges. In practice, some male leaders still interpret equality messages symbolically rather than transformatively. For example, when household role-sharing programs were introduced, some men viewed their involvement as "additional help" rather than as an expression of full equality. This suggests that patriarchal paradigms continue to infiltrate congregants' mindsets, even as the church opens pathways for dialogue on gender equality. The church thus remains in a transitional phase, where family theology must consistently reinforce equality to prevent it from stagnating as mere discourse.

Analyzed through the framework of faith-based gender justice, the Hukurila church's role as a catalyst for change becomes clear. The moral and spiritual authority embedded within the church grants strong legitimacy to gender equality discourses. When equality is framed in the language of faith, it becomes more readily accepted by congregants compared to legal or policy-oriented rhetoric. As Thomsen (2022) notes, religion has the capacity to penetrate both personal and collective domains, providing moral justification that can transform everyday practices. In Hukurila, this is evident in the growing involvement of men in childcare discussions and the emerging recognition that family well-being cannot be achieved without equitable role distribution.

Furthermore, the church's role in shifting patriarchal paradigms also connects directly to its contribution to family well-being. Here, family well-being is defined not only in material terms but also in emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. When domestic roles are more equitably distributed, women gain the space to develop their capacities in education, employment, and community service. This enhances self-confidence, mental health, and the quality of family relationships. Field observations revealed that families more engaged in church programs tended to exhibit greater household harmony, with children appearing more confident and parents more communicative.

Cultural–Religious Synergy as a Framework for Gender-Responsive Education

The synergy between culture and religion in constructing a framework for gender-responsive education in Hukurila emerges as the result of a complex dialectic among customary values, religious doctrines, and everyday lived experiences. This study illustrates how the reinterpretation of the *badraheng* tradition, the active role of the Protestant Church of Maluku (GPM), and the dynamics of the "*tiga batutungku*" as a local social structure simultaneously create opportunities and tensions in shifting patriarchal norms toward more equitable relations. Greaves & Ritz (2022) argue that the interaction of culture, religion, and gender should not be understood as separate parallel entities, but rather as an interwoven field where resistance, adaptation, and transformation unfold simultaneously.

Interviews with youth and progressive leaders reveal that *badraheng*, once understood solely as a customary symbol, is increasingly reinterpreted as a narrative of justice and balance. For

instance, one young informant stated that for his generation, *badraheng* is not merely a symbolic tradition but also a representation of togetherness that transcends gender boundaries. This suggests an attempt to employ local wisdom as the foundation for more inclusive family education. Field observations likewise show that in certain customary events, both boys and girls are now involved in symbolic rituals, something rarely practiced in the past. This indicates that cultural frameworks, often assumed to be static, can in fact open space for transformation.

Religion, on the other hand, plays a significant role in enabling discussions on equality. Through family programs and youth groups, the church promotes an education that emphasizes gender justice in parenting and social participation. Congregational halls often serve as spaces where women feel freer to express their ideas without fear of violating norms. One female informant remarked that she felt more heard when speaking in church forums compared to customary council meetings. This demonstrates how religion can serve as a moral agent balancing patriarchal structures, aligning with the notion of faith-based gender justice, which sees religious institutions as catalysts of social change through spiritual approaches.

Nevertheless, the dynamics of the *Tiga Batutungku* village government, customary leaders, and religious leaders continue to manifest ambivalence in practice. While religious leaders tend to be more progressive in advancing equality, customary leaders often maintain rigid traditional role divisions. A male informant, who also serves as a village official, explained that although the village government accepts gender-based educational programs introduced by external actors, their implementation is frequently adjusted to customary norms, thereby diluting the equality message. Field observations confirm this, as seen in official village meetings where decision-making positions were almost exclusively occupied by men, while women were seated at the margins as passive participants. This reflects [Järvelä's \(2023\)](#) argument that local institutions can simultaneously act as agents of change and impediments to transformation.

The tensions arising between culture, religion, and local structures invite critical reflection on how the people of Hukurila negotiate prevailing norms. Women, for example, are not merely passive subjects but develop strategic forms of negotiation. Within the family sphere, they often invoke religious language to reinforce arguments about the importance of sharing household responsibilities. In this way, the equality values they promote are not perceived as threats to tradition but as extensions of respected moral principles. This demonstrates that social change does not always occur through open confrontation but may advance through subtle forms of compromise.

From an intersectional synergy perspective, the interaction of culture, religion, and gender in Hukurila reveals a complexity that cannot be understood in isolation. Culture, though imbued with patriarchal residues, can serve as a resource when reinterpreted by younger generations. Religion, with its moral authority, provides new legitimacy for discourses of equality. Meanwhile, local structures that appear rigid can become arenas of productive negotiation, albeit in non-linear ways. Thus, gender-responsive education in Hukurila cannot be detached from the ongoing dialectic among these three dimensions.

The distinctiveness of this study lies in demonstrating how the integrative framework of “cultural–religious synergy” offers a new lens for understanding education within customary communities. By emphasizing the synergy between culture and religion, it shows that transformation toward equality need not originate externally but can emerge from within the community itself. Field observations in Hukurila highlight how customary symbols and church teachings, when combined, articulate a vision of the family that is more balanced, where well-being is no longer monopolized by one gender but shared collectively.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultural–religious synergy constitutes a viable and transformative framework for advancing gender-responsive education within indigenous Maluku communities, particularly in Hukurila. In line with the research objective, the findings reveal that the intersection of cultural traditions and religious values does not merely reproduce patriarchal norms but also provides internal resources for negotiating gender equality. Although the *tiga batutungku* (government, customary, and religious leaders) often exhibit ambivalence, local wisdom such as *badraheng* and church-based family programs function as strategic entry points for fostering more inclusive and equitable educational practices. Theoretically, this study contributes to the sociology of education by proposing cultural–religious synergy as a nuanced analytical framework that moves

beyond binary perspectives of tradition versus modernity. It highlights how indigenous epistemologies and spiritual values can be reinterpreted to support gender justice within localized contexts. Practically, the findings offer a grounded model of gender-responsive education that can inform local policy design, particularly by encouraging collaborative engagement among customary institutions, religious organizations, and village governance structures. Concrete implications include integrating gender awareness into church family programs, strengthening community-based educational initiatives, and promoting participatory dialogue among stakeholders to reinterpret cultural norms in more inclusive ways. However, this study is limited by its focus on a single village context, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across different indigenous communities in Maluku and the broader Pacific region, as well as to incorporate longitudinal approaches to assess the sustainability of cultural–religious interventions in shaping gender equality. Further exploration of youth perspectives and digital-mediated forms of community engagement may also enrich the analysis.

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