



**Interrogating masculinity, gender performance, and power dynamics in
Indonesian society through Taylor Swift's 'The Man'**

Muhammad Zawil Kiram*✉

**School of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom
Email: mzkiram1@sheffield.ac.uk*

ABSTRACT

This article examines masculinity, gender roles, and power relations in Indonesian society through Taylor Swift's song "The Man". The lyrics and music video, which criticise the demands and double standards that society places on women in comparison to males, provide a framework for analysing related problems in Indonesia, a country where traditional gender roles are ingrained in the fabric of culture. The qualitative content analysis was employed to systematically evaluate the content of "The Man" within various forms of communication, such as texts, images, and videos. The analysis sheds light on the social forces that influence gender performance and the maintenance of male dominance, highlighting how Swift's critique of gendered power inequalities may be utilised to comprehend the intricacies of masculinity and femininity in Indonesia. The article also highlights the idea of gender performance, taking into account how people in Indonesia either comply with or defy these social norms. Swift's depiction of a society in which people would view her activities differently if she were a man is reminiscent of the experiences of numerous Indonesian women in both public and private settings. The article then concludes how these gendered expectations reinforce power relations and maintain disparities that most likely benefit men.

Keywords: Masculinity; Gender Roles; Power Dynamics; Indonesia; Taylor Swift.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji isu-isu maskulinitas, peran gender, dan hubungan kekuasaan dalam masyarakat Indonesia melalui lagu Taylor Swift berjudul "The Man". Lirik dan video musiknya, yang mengkritik tuntutan dan standar ganda yang diberikan masyarakat kepada perempuan dibandingkan dengan laki-laki, memberikan kerangka kerja untuk menganalisis masalah-masalah terkait di Indonesia sebagai negara dengan peran gender tradisional tertanam dalam budayanya. Analisis konten kualitatif digunakan dalam artikel ini untuk mengevaluasi secara sistematis konten "The Man" dalam berbagai bentuk komunikasi, seperti teks, gambar, dan video. Analisis ini menyoroti kekuatan sosial yang memengaruhi kinerja gender dan pemeliharaan dominasi laki-laki, menyoroti bagaimana kritik Swift terhadap ketidaksetaraan kekuasaan gender dapat digunakan untuk memahami seluk-beluk maskulinitas dan feminitas di Indonesia. Artikel ini juga menyoroti gagasan kinerja gender, dengan mempertimbangkan bagaimana orang-orang di Indonesia mematuhi atau menentang norma-norma sosial ini. Penggambaran Swift tentang masyarakat di mana orang-orang akan memandang aktivitasnya secara berbeda jika dia seorang laki-laki serupa dengan pengalaman banyak wanita Indonesia baik di lingkungan publik maupun pribadi. Artikel ini kemudian menyimpulkan bagaimana ekspektasi gender ini memperkuat hubungan kekuasaan dan mempertahankan kesenjangan yang kemungkinan besar menguntungkan pihak laki-laki.

Kata Kunci: Maskulinitas; Peran Gender; Dinamika Kekuasaan; Indonesia; Taylor Swift.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality persists in various forms across different societies, shaped by the economic structure, social system, and cultural practices. In most societies, typically, women often experience more discrimination, than men who have similar circumstances (Lorber, 2012). The double standards, gender roles, and women's oppression are among the inequalities and are deeply rooted in societal norms, historical contexts, and systemic. In many societies, double standards persistently disadvantage women while favouring men. For instance, women may be criticized for being assertive or ambitious, whereas men exhibiting the same traits are often praised for their leadership qualities. Similarly, women are frequently subjected to scrutiny and judgment regarding their appearance, behaviour, and personal choices, while men enjoy greater freedom and autonomy in these areas (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022). These double standards perpetuate gender inequality by reinforcing harmful stereotypes and restricting women's opportunities for self-expression and advancement.

As for Indonesia, gender equality achievement and its ranking in global gender equality has not shown much improvement, moving from 83rd place in 2023 to 100th in 2024 out of a total of 156 countries (WEF, 2024). Each year, the World Economic Forum (WEF) assesses gender inequality in approximately 150 countries by evaluating factors such as economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. This demonstrates that in Indonesia, women's participation in the public, especially politics, is still limited. Although Indonesia has established legislation mandating a

minimum of 30% female participation in politics, the number of women in parliaments remains low (Holqi et al., 2024). Indonesian women also face enduring challenges when it comes to joining the workforce as they often encounter hurdles in accessing job opportunities and the societal norms that dictate traditional gender roles, where they are expected to primarily focus on domestic duties like tending to household needs and managing family matters while raising children (Kiram, 2020).

In this article, I am interested in analysing how masculinity, gender roles, and double standards are performed and understood within the context of Indonesian through the lens of Taylor Swift's song "The Man". Released in 2019, the song by a phenomenal American song writer Taylor Swift, received an incredibly warm welcome from Swifties and music enthusiast around the world. The single even won several awards including MTV Video Music Award for best direction category (2020), marking its successful debut in the music industry. However, this song does not simply come as the media of entertainment for some groups- especially feminist and gender scholars-, it is a powerful work that promotes liberation and critiques societal gender roles and double standard surrounding gender roles and masculinity. In "The Man," the exploration of gender roles and power dynamics resonates far beyond Western contexts, offering a lens through which to examine societal norms and expectations in diverse cultural settings. Thus, through "The Man" I delve into the intricate narrative surrounding the masculinity, gender roles, double standards, and power dynamics within the public, and domestic life of Indonesian men and women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of gender performance, as articulated by Judith Butler, is central to understanding how norms and behaviours shape and uphold gender identities. According to Butler's theory of gender, masculinity and femininity are not traits but rather a result of cultural expectations influencing behaviours and actions (Butler, 1988). This perspective is further expanded by concept of "hegemonic masculinity," which examines how certain forms of masculinity become dominant and are perpetuated through societal structures. This concept helps us understand how distinct types of masculinity emerge and are supported by societal systems. Hegemonic masculinity is not only one way of being masculine, but rather a culturally glorified form that reinforces the subordination of different masculinities and women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This dominant form is supported and sustained by a variety of institutions, including the media, education, and the workplace, which all define and preserve society standards. By doing so, hegemonic masculinity legitimises power dynamics that favour certain men while marginalising others, resulting in a widespread and resistant to change gender hierarchy (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Masculinity and double standards are closely linked, especially in the context of cultural expectations and norms (Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022). The topic of double standards is well documented in feminist literature, notably in how same acts are appraised differently depending on whether they are performed by men or women. For example, cultural expectations unfairly scrutinise women's bodies and behaviours, frequently reducing them to physical attractiveness or household responsibilities (Bordo, 1993; Foschi, 1996). In Indonesian Muslim society, gender roles, double standards, and power dynamics are heavily affected by religious teachings and cultural traditions that frequently emphasise male leadership and female subservience

(Blackwood, 2005). Indonesian society has a complex power dynamic, with women frequently wielding great influence in the domestic sphere or informal economy (B. White, 1984). These occupations maintain conventional power hierarchies by limiting women's participation in public life, including the workplace. The expectations placed on Indonesian women to perform household responsibilities reinforce existing hierarchies, making it difficult for women to question established conventions and attain equality. However, global media and Western pop culture are rapidly influencing Indonesian gender norms, resulting in a dynamic interplay between global and local narratives of masculinity and femininity (Fennell & Arnot, 2008).

3. METHOD

In this study, I employed qualitative content analysis to systematically examine gender performance and power dynamics within Indonesian society, using Taylor Swift's song "The Man" as a framework. Qualitative content analysis is one of the qualitative methodologies currently accessible for analysing and interpreting data's meaning. It provides a systematic and objective approach for describing and quantifying occurrences (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Bengtsson, 2016). The qualitative content analysis helps to identify major themes or categories within a body of information and then provide a thorough description of the social reality formed by those themes/categories as they play out in a specific setting (Schreier, 2012). To begin, I developed a several themes from "The Man" tailored to capture the nuances of gender performance and power dynamics relevant to the Indonesian context. These themes included gendered double standards both in public and domestic, privilege of masculinity such as career advancement and leadership, gender roles expectations and freedom of expression, toxic masculinity around aggression and dominance, power controls, as well as the intersection between gender and success.

Drawing from both existing literature on gender studies and the themes highlighted in "The Man," I identified key categories for analysis. These categories included, but were not limited to, the portrayal of masculinity and femininity, the roles assigned to men and women in different settings, and the presence of double standards in the depiction of gender behaviours. Then, I analysed the data to identify patterns and trends. For example, I examined how often men were portrayed in leadership roles compared to women, or how frequently assertive behaviour was praised in men but criticized in women. This quantification enabled me to draw comparisons between the gendered expectations depicted in Indonesia and the critiques of masculinity outlined in Taylor Swift's song. For instance, the critiques around masculinity and advantage of being men, as portrayed in the lyrics "*I'm so sick of running as fast as I can, wondering if I'd get there quicker, if I was a man*" which implies that because of their sex, male come across less obstacles in attaining achievement.

Additionally, qualitative content analysis of interviews featuring Taylor Swift provides further insight and support to the analysis. This analysis provided insights into how societal norms around gender performance are constructed and reinforced across different areas of life in Indonesia. I aim to explore the themes of women's oppression, gender roles, masculinity, and the nuanced nature of double standards prevalent in society, which I believe are integral to the song's widespread success and influence. Through this multi-faceted approach, I aim to offer a nuanced understanding of the themes explored in the song and their broader implications within Indonesian society.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. *Patriarchy, Double Standards, and Power Dynamics in Indonesian Society*

The concept of patriarchy refers to social systems that inherently favour men, with males collectively dominating females both structurally (through institutions) and ideologically (through norms and beliefs). This idea of patriarchy is complex and multifaceted, influencing various aspects of life, from private family structures to public institutions (Hunnicut, 2009). Patriarchy operates in two primary spheres: the private and the public. In the private sphere, it affects personal relationships and family dynamics, where men often hold power and authority over women. In the public sphere, it extends to social, economic, and political institutions, where men generally have more access to power and resources than women (Walby, 1989). However, within the public sphere, there is a specific focus on how patriarchy influences the political arena, particularly concerning women's participation in politics. In the public sphere, patriarchy can manifest in ways that directly hinder women's ability to engage in political processes, whether by discouraging their participation, limiting their access to necessary resources, or reinforcing societal norms that devalue their contributions.

In Indonesia, patriarchal values are reinforced through both formal institutions and informal social practices, perpetuating gender inequality and limiting women's autonomy (Dildar, 2015). Cultural norms are significantly influenced by religious teachings, particularly Islam, which is the dominant religion in the country. Certain interpretations of Islamic teachings have been used to justify the maintenance of patriarchal structures, emphasizing traditional gender roles where men are seen as the primary breadwinners and decision-makers, while women are expected to fulfil domestic responsibilities (Idrus et al., 2023). These cultural traditions, often passed down through generations, privilege male lineage and inheritance, further entrenching male dominance. Gender roles in Indonesia are clearly defined and rigidly enforced. Men are typically viewed as protectors and providers, while women are expected to manage the household and care for children. These roles are deeply ingrained in the social fabric, making deviation from them difficult and often leading to social ostracism (Ernanda, 2023). This division of labour not only limits women's participation in the public sphere but also reinforces the notion that men are naturally suited for leadership roles. These expectations extend to education, employment, and politics, where women frequently face barriers and discrimination (England & Farkas, 2017).

In the workplace, women are underrepresented in leadership positions, they navigate a male-dominated landscape that can be hostile to female leadership (Pattenden, 2023). The power dynamics and patriarchal structures in Indonesian society have significant implications for women's rights and opportunities. Despite legal advancements aimed at promoting gender equality, many Indonesian women continue to face systemic discrimination. This is evident in areas such as employment and political participation (Holqi et al., 2024). Although educational attainment for women has improved (Fachrunnisa, 2020; Samarakoon & Parinduri, 2015; Supianto et al., 2024), a significant gender labour gap participation remains, especially in rural areas where traditional norms are more deeply entrenched. In the workplace, women often hold low-paying, informal jobs with little security, and they are underrepresented in leadership roles (Cameron et al., 2024; Dhanani, 2004). This situation is similar to what "The Man" portrait for favouring man in higher positions in public roles.

Picture 1 shows the opening scene of the music video, it presents a scene where a man, which was played by Taylor himself, standing in a contemporary office environment and looking out at a city view below him. From a gender equality standpoint various features in this visual representation stand out as symbols of power and authority. The professional setting along, with the central placement and stance of the character suggests notions of power control and dominance. In cultural settings and situations, these are commonly linked to leadership positions that have historically been held by men.



Picture 1. Opening scene of the music video.



Picture 2. Office scene; portraying man's leadership role.



Picture 3. Office scene; employee complimenting the leader.

Typically, it enforces the belief that men hold a position in professional environments especially in roles related to leadership and decision making. The prominent words “THE MAN” explicitly highlight the connection between masculinity and power. It implies that the individual depicted in the picture symbolizes achievement, power or having attained success, within the business realm. This can suggest that these accomplishments are naturally associated with masculinity and may make women feel excluded by suggesting that these positions are harder for them to reach or not right, for them. The scene prominently features a man with no female presence either directly shown or suggested in any way. This absence of representation can highlight and perpetuate gender disparities in work environments where men are typically viewed as the standard leaders and decision makers while women may be marginalized or not given adequate visibility (Hopkins et al., 2021). The man’s formal attire, the office setting and the cityscape collectively create a potentially clichéd portrayal of male achievement, within a business environment. The scene suggests the idea of upholding gender norms; portraying men as providers and decision makers and possibly positioning women in lesser or less influential positions, within society’s structure and dynamics when looked at from a perspective of gender equality (Giacomin et al., 2022). This scenario underscores the persistent struggles of adequate representation and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes.

Picture 2 depicts the scene at the office where Taylor (the man) seems to be navigating an office setting with ease and confidence amidst the hustle and bustle around him. Various individuals in the vicinity, both men and women are occupied with tasks; some look enthusiastic while others are focused on their workstations. The man at the forefront commands attention as the figure, symbolizing authority. In this environment, where everyone else is bustling about frantically, the man’s serene attitude suggests that he holds authority and a leader figure. Such a depiction can reinforce the notion of dominance in stress filled situations where men are typically portrayed as composed and authoritative while others, like women are often seen as less composed or reactive. The women in the background appear to be either excited or distressed, seeking the man in the centre’s attention or approval. If we interpret, this portrayal could suggest that women, in this setting are viewed as authoritative and more emotionally driven or reliant upon male guidance. This scenario perpetuates stereotypes regarding women’s roles in environments (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

The second picture also shows a hierarchy where the man seems to hold the leadership role or the highest authority position. This scenario may mirror workplace dynamics where men frequently assume roles, as decision makers while women are cast in supporting roles or as assistants who seek approval or respond to the actions of male counterparts. The overall arrangement of this image indicates a work environment characterized by unequal gender norms. The man’s calm and steady demeanour stands out against the unpredictable roles of others like women in professional environments and may inadvertently perpetuate old fashioned beliefs, about gender and power dynamics.

The third picture also reinforces the idea of male dominance in professional settings, where men are often depicted as the central figures who command respect and admiration from others. The colleagues are shown clapping and seemingly celebrating the man’s achievements, in the scenario, mix of both male and female present. However, their roles seem supportive or subordinate in nature as they uplift the central male figures position in this scenario (Khan et al., 2024). Their responsibilities appear to be more of a subordinate nature as they elevate the

prominent male figures status in this situation. This depiction imply that men are more likely to receive acknowledgment and success in a professional setting while women and other coworkers often assume roles that are supportive rather than leadership oriented (Carli & Eagly, 2001). The visual of the video also complimented by the lyrics, when Taylor said:

"I'd be a fearless leader"

"I'd be an alpha type"

"When everyone believes ya"

"What's that like?"

These lyrics describes how men are seen as superior to women in society. They are seen as "fearless leaders" and "alpha types" and too often men are seen as having more power than women especially when it comes to leading and being in charge. The notion that men are the fearless leaders and alpha figures portraying strength, toughness, masculinity, and logical, are hailed as being perfect for leadership roles, further cementing the idea that men are inherently better suited for positions of authority and making decisions (Vecchio, 2002). Conversely, females are frequently portrayed as nurturing, sensitive, reliant and affectionate attributes that are appreciated in situations but may not be deemed appropriate for positions of power or control to the same degree as characteristics considered "masculine" (Coenjaerts et al., 2021; Miller & Ubeda, 2012). If a woman exhibits qualities typically linked with men, such as confidence or determination, she could face scrutiny. She may not be seen as a leader. Instead, be judged as "inappropriate" or unfairly dismissed especially when she is trying to assert her authority or ask for something to be done (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kolb, 1999). In the interview with CBC Sunday morning, Taylor stated that *"a man does something, it's strategic, a woman does the same thing, it's calculated, men can react, women can only overreact."* which reflects the societies' unfair expectations on women while allowing men more freedom to express themselves without judgment (Swift, 2019).

This unequal treatment perpetuates gender biases, undermines the credibility of women who seek to break free from conventional gender expectations. The main critics that Taylor posed in the music video are applicable to analyse gender inequality issues in Indonesian society, as many women are still less preferred to lead which hinders them to achieve higher/leadership positions in public (S. White et al., 2023). Taylor's work describes how being the man offers specific advantage of opportunities to achieve certain success due to gender stereotype in society, as she said:

"I'm so sick of running as fast as I can"

"Wondering if I'd get there quicker"

"If I was a man"

"And I'm so sick of them coming at me again"

"Cause if I was a man"

"Then I'd be the man"

4.2. Gender Roles and Double Standards at Domestic Level

"The Man" also highlighted another important aspect of inequality related to gender roles, double standards, and men's and women's involvement in domestic/family life, specifically focusing on childcare. There are different expectations that society holds against

men and women, and they are expected to behave accordingly. In society, women are usually seen as the ones responsible for childcare and household duties; if they deviate from these roles they are often criticized harshly. Men on the hands tend to be encouraged to focus more on their careers and receive admiration for any minor contribution they make to family matters. This disparity, in expectations reinforces the stereotype that caregiving's solely a woman's duty while men's involvement is viewed as commendable rather than expected.

The way individuals perform gender plays a crucial role in shaping distinct gender roles between men and women. These gender roles, in turn, lead to the allocation of different activities and social responsibilities based on gender. As a result of these gender specific roles, disparities emerge in opportunities and potential life trajectories for both women and men (West & Zimmerman, 2009). For example, women have traditionally been expected to assume domestic duties like cooking, cleaning, and childcare, while men have been expected to provide financially and handle more physically demanding tasks such as yard work or home repairs. These gendered expectations have been perpetuated through socialization, media, and cultural norms. Government policies also play a role in influencing gender roles. For instance, countries that provide equal parental leave allowances to both mothers and fathers are more likely to challenge traditional parenting role expectations compared to those offering more exclusive parental leave benefits, often directed towards mothers (maternity leave) (Burrell et al., 2021; Makita, 2010).

The phenomenon does not only exist in non-Western context, but also in Muslim society such as Indonesia, where the women in Indonesia are generally seen as domestic workers and men as providers. In relation to this, one of the most significant similarities in "The Man" with the Indonesian society is around the expectation of marriage and relationship commitment. In Indonesia, specifically, women are "required" to marry when they reach the age of 20 or over. Family members, friends, relatives, and societies are more likely to question their marriage than their education or career during this period, and if they married at their later ages (the 30s) or more, they would be questioned constantly by societies, which makes the situation even more complicated for women to choose between pursuing their dreams and fulfilling the demand of families and societies (Himawan et al., 2018b; Himawan, 2019; Kiram, 2020; Retnaningsih, 2013).

"I would be complex"

"I would be cool"

"They'd say I played the field before I found someone to commit to"

These lyrics reflect the double standards in how society perceives men's and women's behaviours, particularly regarding relationships and commitment. If a woman were to behave in a way that is often deemed acceptable or even celebrated for men - such as being complex, independent, or being selective when selecting partner- she might face criticism or judgment. However, when men exhibit these traits, they are often viewed as "cool" or as having successfully navigated their options before finding someone to commit to. This highlights the gendered expectations placed on women to conform to certain standards of behaviour, while men are given more freedom to explore and express themselves without facing the same level of societal scrutiny. It underscores the persistent double standard that praises men for behaviours that might be used to judge or diminish women.

In Indonesian society, a similar double standard exists where men receive more supportive treatment when they delay marriage to focus on either emotional or financial preparation or both. This behaviour is often viewed positively, as men are seen as being responsible and ensuring they are ready for the commitments of marriage. In contrast, women who delay marriage for the same reasons tend to face criticism. Society may question their intentions or view them as deviating from traditional gender expectations, which emphasize early marriage and family responsibilities for women (DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Himawan et al., 2018a).



Picture 4. Public scene, the man with his child in the park.



Picture 5. Public scene, the man receives appreciation from the crowd.

“The Man” also delves into the contrasting ways men and women are viewed when it comes to taking care of children. The scene from the music video further emphasizes the theme of gender roles, double standards, and societal expectations, particularly in the context of parenting. Picture 4 shows a man sitting on the edge of a fountain, casually talking on the phone while a young girl, his daughter, sits next to him. In the background, other women are seen actively engaged in caring for their children. The visual contrast between the man and the women highlights a common societal double standard regarding parenting responsibilities. Men, when seen in the role of a caregiver, are often praised or seen as exceptional, even when their involvement is minimal, as depicted by the man’s relaxed posture and lack of direct

engagement with the child. Meanwhile, if women handle other work or accept phone call while looking after children may be judged as “incompetent” or “careless” as they are expected to be actively always involved in childcare, a duty that is often taken for granted (Verniers et al., 2022).

In picture 5, the central figure, a man holding a child, is surrounded by an applauding crowd with a banner in the background reading “WORLD’S GREATEST DAD.” The scene satirically exaggerates the acclaim and appreciation that males frequently receive for carrying out fundamental parental responsibilities. In contrast, comparable acts taken by women are usually accepted as normal or anticipated and receive no special recognition. The overly enthusiastic praise reflects the double standards that exist in society, where women are usually the ones who shoulder the majority of childcare tasks while males are frequently praised for their very little involvement. This representation questions the idea that men should be given more credit for taking on tasks that are typically associated with women and criticises the unequal emphasis placed on gender roles. The scene highlights the ongoing disparity in the way that parental responsibilities are viewed and rewarded according to gender. This, however, does not disregard the importance of men’s involvement in childcare, but rather highlights the different treatment that men and women receive when doing the same activities due to double standards.

5. CONCLUSION

Deeply ingrained in historical contexts, societal norms, and systemic inequalities, the concepts of gender roles, double standards, and women’s oppression highlight unfair treatment of various groups or individuals, frequently based on gender, where in one group is held to different standards or expectations than another. Double standards are prevalent in many societies, constantly harming women and benefiting men. Men who display similar attributes are frequently commended for their leadership abilities, whereas women may face criticism for being pushy or ambitious. In a similar vein, men have more flexibility and autonomy when it comes to looks, behaviour, and personal decisions, while women are usually the target of criticism and scrutiny. Due to the limitations placed on women’s ability to express themselves and the reinforcement of negative preconceptions, these double standards help to maintain gender inequality.

Taylor Swift’s song “The Man” critiques this dynamic by highlighting the privileges men receive simply due to their gender performance. The song underscores how traits celebrated in men are often criticized in women, exposing the double standards that reinforce gendered behaviour and inequality. “The Man” resonates with Bordo’s observations by challenging the societal norms that allow men to navigate the world with a freedom and often denied to women. This critique of double standards is crucial for understanding how gender inequality is perpetuated through cultural narratives and societal expectations. Taylor Swift’s “The Man” serves as a global critique of gender inequality, yet its themes resonate within the specific cultural context of Indonesian society. The song’s critique of masculinity and power dynamics offers a lens through which to examine the localized experiences of gender inequality in Indonesia, particularly how these global critiques intersect with, challenge, or reinforce local cultural practices.

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