

Between Local Belief and International Norms: Gender Inequality among Marapu Women in Sumba

Syprianus Aristeus*

Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, Indonesia

Email: sypr001@brin.go.id, *Corresponding Author

Firdaus

Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, Indonesia

Email: fird006@brin.go.id

Penny Naluria Utami

Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, Indonesia

Email: penn002@brin.go.id

Rina Shahriyani Shahrullah

Universitas Internasional Batam, Indonesia

Email: rina@uib.ac.id

Aji Baskoro

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Email: ajibaskoro@mail.ugm.ac.id

Chuzaimatus Saadah

Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesia

Email: chuzaimatus.saadah@uingusdur.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Although Indonesia's legal framework recognizes indigenous religions and upholds gender equality, these principles remain largely unrealized for Marapu women due to the intersection of patriarchal customary systems and state institutional biases. This study explores the persistence of gender inequality among Marapu women. Employing an empirical socio-legal approach, data were collected through literature review and field research, including in-depth interviews and observations across four regencies of Sumba Island: East, Central, West, and Southwest Sumba. Informants included representatives from government agencies, NGOs, and Marapu community leaders. Findings indicate that while Marapu cosmology symbolically recognizes gender dualism, its social practice sustains male

authority in ritual leadership, inheritance, and decision-making. State institutions, through religious and administrative structures, indirectly perpetuate these inequalities by privileging formal religions and patriarchal norms. The study concludes that promoting gender justice for Marapu women requires contextual reforms that integrate cultural reinterpretation, community participation, and inclusive policy frameworks grounded in feminist legal pluralism.

[Meskipun kerangka hukum Indonesia telah mengakui keberadaan agama-agama leluhur serta menegaskan prinsip kesetaraan gender, realitasnya prinsip tersebut belum sepenuhnya terwujud bagi perempuan Marapu. Hal ini disebabkan oleh persinggungan antara sistem adat yang patriarkal dengan bias kelembagaan negara yang turut memperkuat posisi subordinat perempuan. Penelitian ini mengkaji ketimpangan gender yang dialami oleh perempuan Marapu penghayat kepercayaan di Sumba. Data diperoleh melalui studi pustaka dan penelitian lapangan yang mencakup wawancara mendalam serta observasi di empat kabupaten di Pulau Sumba: Sumba Timur, Sumba Tengah, Sumba Barat, dan Sumba Barat Daya. Informan terdiri atas perwakilan lembaga pemerintah, organisasi non-pemerintah, serta tokoh dan pemimpin komunitas Marapu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kosmologi Marapu secara simbolik mengakui dualisme gender, praktik sosialnya tetap mempertahankan dominasi laki-laki dalam kepemimpinan ritual, hak waris, dan pengambilan keputusan. Sementara itu, institusi negara melalui struktur keagamaan dan administrasi turut memperkuat ketimpangan ini dengan memprioritaskan agama formal dan norma patriarkal. Hasil temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keadilan gender bagi perempuan Marapu memerlukan reformasi kontekstual melalui reinterpretasi nilai adat, partisipasi komunitas, serta kebijakan inklusif yang berlandaskan pada pluralisme hukum feminis.]

KEYWORDS

Gender inequality, women, Marapu belief, international law

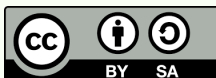
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Introduction

Gender inequality within Indonesia's indigenous communities persists as a deeply entrenched and multifaceted phenomenon that exposes the limitations of formal legal guarantees of equality. Despite Indonesia's constitutional commitment and its ratification of international human rights instruments prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender or belief, these normative commitments often fail to transform the lived realities of marginalized groups. This failure is particularly evident among Marapu women in Sumba Island, whose everyday lives remain governed by customary norms and patriarchal traditions that restrict their participation in social, economic, and ritual domains. The disjunction between

state law and indigenous customs reveals a critical gap in Indonesia's socio-legal framework: legal recognition does not necessarily ensure substantive equality. Addressing this gap requires an in-depth understanding of how tradition, rights, and law intersect to shape the gendered realities of indigenous women. Accordingly, this research situates the Marapu community as an empirical lens through which to examine how deeply embedded patriarchal values, when left unchallenged, can neutralize the transformative potential of national and international human rights law, and how such tensions might be reconciled through culturally grounded socio-legal transformation.

A recent report by *Puan Hayati*, a women's organization representing practitioners of indigenous beliefs, highlights the uneven implementation of the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 97/PUU-XV/2016 across local administrative levels. Misinterpretations of the ruling, coupled with a persistent lack of awareness and entrenched negative attitudes among government officials, have perpetuated discriminatory practices against followers of indigenous faiths. These institutional shortcomings not only reflect the state's limited commitment to substantive equality but also intersect with pre-existing gender hierarchies within traditional communities. Within this context, Marapu women face compounded barriers, as the patriarchal underpinnings of their belief system reinforce their subordinate status both in public administration and in local sociocultural structures.¹

Marapu women thus constitute a crucial case for examining the intersection of tradition, gender, and legal pluralism in Indonesia. Their lived experiences demonstrate how formal guarantees of equality under national law often fail to produce tangible change when confronted with customary norms that legitimize gender subordination. Through the lens of intersectional feminism and socio-legal analysis, this study seeks to unpack the overlapping structures of power, cultural, religious, and legal, that sustain gender inequality within the Marapu community.

Women and girls practitioners of Indigenous beliefs also confront intersectional issues, which involve overlapping forms of discrimination linked to multiple life variables² These include their identity as an Indigenous community, low levels of education,³ and limited access to public spheres⁴ all compounded by enduring patriarchal culture.⁵ Therefore, we employ an intersectionality approach in this research to identify the intersectional challenges faced by women with the

¹ Kornelis Kewa Ama, "Nasib Perempuan Sumba dan Pengakuan Komunitas Agama Asli Marapu," *kompas.id*, April 23, 2022, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/humaniora/2022/04/21/nasib-perempuan-sumba-dan-pengakuan-komunitas-agama-asli-marapu>.

² Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminism And Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford University Press/Oxford, 1998).

³ Christofan Dorry Steven and Taufik Akbar Rizqy Yunanto, "Pengaruh Belis Dalam Masyarakat Sumba," *Insight: Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Penelitian Psikologi* 15, no. 2 (2019): 204–12.

⁴ Krisna Rambu Kaita Wewi and Faizal Kurniawan, "Ketimpangan Gender Dalam Akses Pendidikan Di Desa Umbu Kawolu Kabupaten Sumba Tengah," *JURNAL PARADIGMA: Journal of Sociology Research and Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 37–51.

⁵ Lidwina Inge Nurtjahyo, "Partisipasi Perempuan Dalam Proses Pengambilan Keputusan Di Dewan Adat Terkait Dengan Penyelesaian Kasus-Kasus Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan: Kisah Dari Atambua, Sumba Timur, Rote Dan Labuan Bajo," *Jurnal Hukum & Pembangunan* 50, no. 1 (2020): 106–23.

Marapu belief on Sumba Island and propose transformative strategies through socio-legal frameworks to minimize or eliminate the gender disparities experienced by Marapu women.

This paper seeks to address two interrelated research questions that explore the complexities of gender inequality and cultural transformation within the *Marapu* community on Sumba Island, Indonesia. The first question examines the extent to which modernization and socio-legal transformations influence the continuity of *Marapu* as the core of Sumbanese identity, particularly in reshaping cultural norms, belief systems, and gender relations within the community. The second question explores how international, ASEAN, and national socio-legal frameworks can possibly be harmonized to promote gender justice and the protection of *Marapu* women's rights while maintaining respect for their indigenous cultural identity. This includes investigating how global and regional human rights instruments, such as CEDAW, UNDRIP, and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, can be effectively integrated within Indonesia's plural legal framework to address the specific challenges faced by *Marapu* women. By bridging universal principles of gender equality with local traditions through participatory and culturally grounded reform, this research aims to propose transformative strategies that empower *Marapu* women as active agents of change, ensuring that gender justice emerges as an internal evolution rooted in cultural understanding rather than an externally imposed norm.

This study is an empirical research designed to explore legal issues and the existing social realities against Marapu women on Sumba Island. The approach combines normative and empirical legal perspectives by incorporating socio-legal⁶ and intersectional feminism approaches.⁷ The research analyses relevant legal requirements and comparing them with real-life events or the practical application of laws,⁸ in Sumba society. Data was obtained by desk review,⁹ interviews, and observation.¹⁰ Key informants were the representatives from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Civil Registration Office, the National Unity and Politics Agency, the Legal Government Sector of the District, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local Marapu community leaders, and prominent figures of Marapu belief. The research was conducted across Sumba Island, encompassing its four administrative regencies: East Sumba, Central Sumba, West Sumba, and Southwest Sumba.¹¹

⁶ Jonaedi Efendi and Johnny Ibrahim, *Metode Penelitian Hukum: Normatif Dan Empiris* (Prenada Media, 2018).

⁷ Michelle Ciurria, *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019).

⁸ Alberta Giorgi, "Religious Feminists and the Intersectional Feminist Movements: Insights from a Case Study," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 28, no. 2 (2021): 244–59.

⁹ Abd Hadi and others, *Penelitian Kualitatif Studi Fenomenologi, Case Study, Grounded Theory, Etnografi, Biografi* (CV. Pena Persada, 2021).

¹⁰ Dadang Sumarna and Ayyub Kadriah, "Penelitian Kualitatif Terhadap Hukum Empiris," *Jurnal Penelitian Serambi Hukum* 16, no. 02 (2023): 101–13.

¹¹ Cynthia T Fowler, "Customary Rights and Freshwater Ecology in Pluralistic Societies on the Monsoonal Island of Sumba (Eastern Indonesia)," *Frontiers in Environmental Science* 10 (2022): 842647.

Marapu as the Sumbanese Identity

The term “marapu” signifies entities that are “blessed” or “exalted,” referring to spirits. “Marapu” can refer to ancestors and is used to identify ancestral spirits who are revered for their roles as rulers within the *kabihu* (tribe) and as intermediaries between humans and transcendental forces.¹² Marapu is a local belief system on Sumba Island rooted in the veneration of ancestral spirits.¹³ Although worshiped as helpful deities, marapu are not perceived as gods. God is viewed as the highest entity, located far above the heavens and unreachable by humans.¹⁴ Therefore, an intermediary is needed to connect humans with God, a role fulfilled by Marapu.¹⁵ In other words, all petitions to the God are conveyed through the intercession of Marapu.¹⁶ The fundamental premise of this worship is the belief in the existence of souls, supernatural beings, and supernatural powers.¹⁷ The belief in Marapu is an indigenous belief still held by the Sumbanese people living on Sumba Island.¹⁸

Marapu belief system holds a significant place as the primary identity for the Sumbanese people, emphasizing the statement, “this is our religion.” The people of Sumba actively label themselves through various religious activities. Fundamentally, the cultural identity of the Sumbanese consists of three main components: religion (*marapu*), place of residence (*paraingu*), and family (*kabihu*). These elements are integral to the Sumbanese identity, forming an inseparable characteristic.¹⁹ As an intrinsic part of the Sumbanese identity, Marapu is integrated into the community's social and cultural aspects. This can be observed in the settlement patterns, which include various places of worship such as large houses (*uma bokulu*), worship monuments (*katoda*), and stone graves. Traditional Sumbanese houses are constructed based on a cosmology of spatial division, namely the upper part serves as the dwelling for Marapu, the middle for human habitation, and the lower part for animal enclosures.²⁰

¹² Johanis Putratama Kamuri, “Menimbang Posisi Penganut Kepercayaan Marapu Di Hadapan Pemerintah Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia,” *Societas Dei: Jurnal Agama Dan Masyarakat* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1.

¹³ Anne Magda Smilde, “Notions of Freedom in the Rise of a Sumbanese Christianity (1902–2002),” *Exchange* 52, no. 3 (2023): 173–203.

¹⁴ Meriana Malo, “Kajian Teologis Terhadap Pemahaman Warga Kampung Bondo Bukka Tentang Yang Transenden Setelah Berpindah Agama Dari Marapu Ke Kristen” (PhD Thesis, Program Studi Teologi FTEO-UKSW, 2019).

¹⁵ Yoseph Andreas Gual and Marina de Olivera Kaesnube, “Nahake Sebagai Sebuah Komunikasi Dalam Tradisi Pertanian Masyarakat Kaubele,” *Jurnal Communio: Jurnal Jurusan Ilmu Komunikasi* 12, no. 2 (2023): 282–96.

¹⁶ Daud Saleh Luji et al., “Makna Dan Nilai Pedagogis-Teologis Dalam Tradisi Waura Watu Pada Masyarakat Anakalang, Sumba Tengah,” *SCRIPTA: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pelayanan Kontekstual* 15, no. 1 (2023): 136–49.

¹⁷ Ambrosius Randa Djawa and Agus Suprijono, “Ritual Marapu Di Masyarakat Sumba Timur,” *Avatara, e-Journal Pendidikan Sejarah* 2, 2014, 71–85.

¹⁸ Makoto Koike, “Indigenous and Local Knowledge Promoting SDGs in Indonesia: The Case of the Sumbanese Cultural Festival,” *Journal of Environmental Science and Sustainable Development* 2, no. 2 (2019): 218–27.

¹⁹ Purwadi Soeriadiredja, “Marapu: Konstruksi Identitas Budaya Orang Sumba, NTT,” Article, *Antropologi Indonesia* (Depok, Indonesia) 34, no. 1 (2013).

²⁰ Krisnina Dohan Limantara and others, “Penerapan ‘Guna Dan Citra’ Dalam Arsitektur Nusantara Studi Kasus: Uma Mbatangu, Tongkonan, Dan Sulah Nyanda,” *Jurnal Lingkungan Karya Arsitektur (LingKAr)* 3, no. 1 (2024): 9–20.

Marapu, as a belief and cultural practice, encompasses specific rituals and ceremonies that serve as markers of identity. Some of these rituals are recognized as distinct cultural practices of Sumba. For example, marriage is regarded as sacred, as its purpose is to produce descendants who will preserve the Marapu household.²¹ Marriages are generally divided into two main categories: those involving a formal betrothal and those without it.²² A betrothal-based marriage is deemed legitimate under Marapu customary law.²³ This type of marriage can occur either through the mutual consent of the couple, without necessarily involving family approval, or through family arrangements without the couple's agreement. The betrothal process involves negotiating the *belis*, a bride price that consists of offerings from the groom's family to the bride's family, akin to a dowry.²⁴ The *belis* signifies respect for the bride and serves as a bond between the families or clans participating in the marriage. It is a mandatory element of the union. Without it, the marriage is considered invalid²⁵ or postponed until the agreed amount is fully paid.²⁶ Marriages without a formal betrothal, such as *kawin tangkap* (captive marriage), do not involve prior negotiation of the *belis*.²⁷ In the captive marriage, the bride is seized and taken to be married.²⁸ After the capture, the families convene to formally recognize the marriage through customary rites, including the settlement of the *belis*.²⁹ This type of marriage is often employed as a way to bypass difficulties associated with the traditional betrothal process and the payment of *belis*.³⁰

Another unique aspect of Marapu culture is the division of labor, where work is viewed as "*taba uhu kaba wai Marapu*" (the plate of rice and the cup of drink from Marapu).³¹ The male role is to ensure the family's survival by overcoming external threats.³² Men's work includes *ráma woka* (farming), *ráma látangu* (rice cultivation), *paloku banda* (livestock raising), *purungu mihi* (fishing), *harapu wolu* (tapping palm sap), *patamangu* (hunting), *danggangu* (trading), *mandara*

²¹ Lailiy Muthmainnah and Sonjoruri Budiani Trisakti, "RUANG PRIVAT INDIVIDU DALAM SISTEM KAWIN MAWIN MASYARAKAT SUMBA TIMUR," *Jurnal Filsafat* 20, no. 3 (2016): 3.

²² Johanis Putratama Kamuri and Grace Mariany Toumeluk, "Tinjauan Teologis Terhadap Tradisi Kawin Tangkap Di Pulau Sumba–Nusa Tenggara Timur," *DUNAMIS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 6, no. 1 (2021): 176–98.

²³ Marthen Malo et al., "Praktik Kawin Tangkap Di Sumba Barat Daya Dalam Perspektif Perkawinan Kristen," *KAMASEAN: Jurnal Teologi Kristen* 4, no. 2 (2023): 113–29.

²⁴ Maria Ledé et al., "Tradisi Belis Dalam Perkawinan Adat Suku Weelewo," *CIVICUS: Pendidikan-Penelitian-Pengabdian Pendidikan Pancasila Dan Kewarganegaraan* 5, no. 2 (2018): 20.

²⁵ Steven and Yunanto, "Pengaruh Belis Dalam Masyarakat Sumba."

²⁶ Zedi Muttaqin et al., "Tradisi Pemindehan Perempuan Dalam Perkawinan Adat Masyarakat Nyura Lele Suku Wee Leo Kabupaten Sumba Barat Daya," *CIVICUS: Pendidikan-Penelitian-Pengabdian Pendidikan Pancasila Dan Kewarganegaraan* 8, no. 1 (2020): 52–62.

²⁷ Oe H. Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba dan Adat Istiadatnya* (BPK Gunung Mulia, 1976); Kamuri and Toumeluk, "Tinjauan Teologis Terhadap Tradisi Kawin Tangkap Di Pulau Sumba–Nusa Tenggara Timur."

²⁸ Guidora Julianta Kopong, "Kekerasan Berbasis Gender: Telaah Teoritis 'Kawin Tangkap' Dalam Budaya Sumba (NTT)," *Optimisme: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra Dan Budaya* 1, no. 2 (2020): 23–27.

²⁹ Oheo Kaimuddin Haris et al., "Adat Kawin Tangkap (Perkawinan Paksa) Sebagai Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual," *Halu Oleo Legal Research* 5, no. 1 (2023): 1–12.

³⁰ Steven and Yunanto, "Pengaruh Belis Dalam Masyarakat Sumba."

³¹ Umbu Pura Woha, *Marapu, Kepercayaan Asli Orang Sumba* (CV Anda Manangu, 2022).

³² Woha, *Marapu, Kepercayaan Asli Orang Sumba*.

(foraging), *matukangu* (craftsmanship), *mapandoi* (handicrafts), and *matuku* (making jewelry).³³ In contrast, the role of Marapu women involves managing the daily survival needs of all family members. This role is reflected in rituals associated with women's domestic activities. Women's work includes *ráma kamba* (gathering), *paloku hembra* (weaving), *pipi wurungu* (pottery making), *malala mehi* (cooking salt), *tunu kapu* (burning lime), *majii/maunangu/manganangu* (braiding), *mautu* (sewing), and *paloku pangangu* (preparing ceremonial food).³⁴

Unlike other Marapu communities on Sumba Island, the Marapu society in East Sumba Regency follows a caste system known as *maramba-ata*.³⁵ This social stratification system governs cultural and social relations, where the king's commands must be obeyed by the subjects under his authority.³⁶ The term "*maramba-ata*" comes from the East Sumba language, with "*maramba*" meaning king and "*ata*" meaning servant or slave.³⁷ This caste system has long existed in the Marapu community, particularly in Prailiu Village, Kampera District, East Sumba Regency, where it remains widely practiced, especially in Kampung Raja Prailiu, from ancient times to the present.³⁸ There are distinct social classes, which include³⁹*ratu*. In this social structure, the Ratu is a role held by certain lineages who act as intermediaries between the Maramba, the nobility, and the wider community. They are responsible for conveying messages from visitors to the Maramba and relaying the responses or decisions back to those concerned. The Maramba themselves hold a position of great authority and respect, believed to be appointed through divine sanction. Within this group, there is a distinction between high nobility or royalty and common nobility, with status passed down through noble lineage. Below them are the *Ata*, who traditionally serve the Maramba as attendants or helpers. There are also the *Kabihu Mbakul*, large clans that do not have ties to servant groups or nobility and do not identify as noble. Meanwhile, the *Kabihu Kudu* are smaller clans formed over time by individuals of mixed noble and servant lineage, evolving into distinct clan groups in their own right.

The Maramba (king or noble) holds several rights over the *Ata* (servants), including the right to own servants, the right to command servants, the right to punish servants, and the right to sell servants.⁴⁰ In return, the Maramba has certain obligations towards their servants, including full responsibility for their well-

³³ Woha, *Marapu, Kepercayaan Asli Orang Sumba*.

³⁴ Woha, *Marapu, Kepercayaan Asli Orang Sumba*.

³⁵ Siti Barokah, "Erasmus University Thesis Repository: An Ethnographic Investigation of Master-Slave Relation in Sumba, Indonesia." (Erasmus University Thesis, 2016), <https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/37349/>.

³⁶ Elsy Sonastry Rambu Amma et al., "Keberadaan Kasta Dalam Masyarakat Adat Di Sumba Timur Dalam Konteks Hak Asasi Manusia," *Jurnal Indonesia Sosial Teknologi* 4, no. 6 (2023): 645–54.

³⁷ Jessica Tirza Felle and Sukri Armin Kana, "Analisis Pandangan Gereja Terhadap Praktik Perbudakan Dalam Tradisi Suku Sumba," *Jurnal Teologi Kontekstual Indonesia* 2, no. 1 (2021): 51–52.

³⁸ Amma et al., "Keberadaan Kasta Dalam Masyarakat Adat Di Sumba Timur Dalam Konteks Hak Asasi Manusia."

³⁹ Fibry Jati Nugroho and Umbu Yanto Namu Praing, "Tinjauan Teologis Sikap Gereja Kristen Sumba Terhadap Stratifikasi Sosial Yang Ada Di Jemaat Pau-Umabara," *Alucio Dei* 5, no. 1 (2021): 21–37.

⁴⁰ Amma et al., "Keberadaan Kasta Dalam Masyarakat Adat Di Sumba Timur Dalam Konteks Hak Asasi Manusia."

being. This includes caring for them when they are sick, supporting them during marriage or death, and protecting them in disputes or conflicts with the community. Some obligations of the servants include the obligation to marry within the same class of servants and to obey the king's commands.⁴¹ Additionally, *Ata* are not free to choose their own religion. They must follow the religious beliefs of their Maramba or king.⁴² Based on our findings, we conclude that Marapu extends beyond being a spiritual entity, encompassing profound social and religious dimensions in the lives of the Sumbanese people who believe in the existence of ancestral spirits. It is an identity of the Sumbanese people.

Women's Position in the Marapu Community: a Gender Inequality

The Marapu cosmology constructs a dualistic worldview in which male and female spirits coexist as complementary forces; yet, this symbolic balance is not reflected in the lived realities of the community.⁴³ Within the Marapu customary system, gender roles are rigidly prescribed, situating men in positions of ritual and political authority while confining women to domestic and supportive functions.⁴⁴ Ritual authority, inheritance rights, and lineage continuity are centered around male dominance, a structure deeply rooted in the customary law of the *kabihu* (clan). During ceremonial events, women's participation is largely limited to preparing ritual food, betel, and offerings, with no opportunity to engage in the spiritual dialogues or decision-making processes led by male elders.

Nevertheless, modernization has begun to subtly challenge these gender boundaries. As observed in an interview with Lidda Mawomude (West Sumba, 04 June 2024), education has become a transformative factor in altering perceptions within the Marapu community. Many Sumbanese youth, educated outside the island, particularly in Java, have encountered modern ideas including feminist thought. Mawomude noted that women have gradually begun to articulate opinions during customary events, although their voices are still mediated through male representatives. This emerging participation represents an initial, albeit cautious, step toward gender inclusion within a traditionally patriarchal system.

Empirical data collected through field interviews and observations reveal that gender inequality within the Marapu community manifests in multiple and interrelated domains, ritual, economic, political, educational, and legal. These forms of inequality demonstrate that women's subordination is not a product of tradition alone, but rather an outcome of overlapping systems of cultural, legal, and institutional power.

⁴¹ Amma et al., "Keberadaan Kasta Dalam Masyarakat Adat Di Sumba Timur Dalam Konteks Hak Asasi Manusia."

⁴² Amma et al., "Keberadaan Kasta Dalam Masyarakat Adat Di Sumba Timur Dalam Konteks Hak Asasi Manusia."

⁴³ Amma et al., "Keberadaan Kasta Dalam Masyarakat Adat Di Sumba Timur Dalam Konteks Hak Asasi Manusia."

⁴⁴ Ida Bagus Oka Wedasantara and I Nyoman Suarsana, "Formalisasi Beragama Penganut Marapu Melalui Pendidikan Formal Pada Masyarakat Kampung Tarung Di Sumba Barat, NTT," *Humanis* 23, no. 2 (2019): 158.

Table 1. Forms of gender inequality among Marapu women

Domain of Inequality	Description	Illustrative Example
Religious and Ritual Exclusion	Women are excluded from leading or speaking in major rituals and cannot communicate with ancestral spirits.	During the <i>Wulla Poddu</i> ceremony, only male elders are permitted to speak to the ancestral spirits, while women remain outside ritual spaces.
Inheritance and Property Rights	Land and clan property are passed down patrilineally, excluding daughters from inheritance.	Daughters rarely inherit ancestral land; ownership and lineage continuity are reserved for male heirs within the <i>Kabihu</i> .
Marriage and Belis Practice	The Belis system reinforces women's economic dependency and commodification.	After the Belis payment, a woman is considered part of her husband's clan and loses her rights in her natal family.
Political Participation	Women's voices are excluded from customary councils and village-level decision-making.	In <i>Kabihu</i> councils and community meetings, deliberations are dominated by male elders, and women are only present to assist logistically.
Access to Education and Employment	Cultural expectations prioritize domestic roles, limiting access to schooling and wage labor.	Early marriage and domestic obligations prevent many women from continuing education beyond secondary school, restricting their economic independence.

These findings demonstrate that inequality in the Marapu context extends beyond mere gender bias, it reflects a multilayered intersection of belief, tradition, and legal marginalization. The exclusion of women from ritual and inheritance rights is legitimized by both customary law and spiritual belief, creating structural barriers that restrict women's autonomy. The commodification of women, such as through *belis*, further intertwines gender, economy, and culture, where women's social status is defined by their transactional value rather than individual agency. A parallel shift can be traced through the evolving interpretation of *belis* (bride price), a central institution in Marapu marriage customs. Traditionally, *belis* symbolized the sacred bond between two *kabisu* (clans), serving as a medium of familial alliance and spiritual balance. The items exchanged, such as gongs, spears, or machetes, carried deep philosophical meaning, symbolizing mutual respect. However, since the 1950s, the meaning of *belis* has shifted toward commodification, transforming into a form of social debt between families.⁴⁵ The inflation of *belis* value, from 10–20 livestock in earlier decades to up to 100 in contemporary practice, has generated serious socioeconomic consequences, including family conflicts, debt, and even disrupted access to education.⁴⁶ During a focus group discussion (East Sumba, 27 May 2024), Umbu Remi emphasized that while *Belis* was once intended to honor the woman's family, its current transactional nature effectively commodifies women, reinforcing gender inequality

⁴⁵ Yanuarius Lende Wara and Wahyu Purwiyastuti, *Pergeseran Makna Belis Dalam Adat Perkawinan Masyarakat Sumba* (Widya Sari Press Salatiga, 2012), <https://repository.uksw.edu/handle/123456789/6410>.

⁴⁶ Muttaqin et al., "Tradisi Pemindahan Perempuan Dalam Perkawinan Adat Masyarakat Nyura Lele Suku Wee Leo Kabupaten Sumba Barat Daya."

by situating women as the object of exchange rather than as active participants in marital decision-making.

The subordination of Marapu women is exacerbated by the intersection of customary patriarchy with state-level institutional discrimination. As followers of an indigenous belief system that was long excluded from official religious recognition, Marapu women experience double marginalization, both as women in a patriarchal culture and as indigenous believers in a legal system that privileges major religions. The *Puan Hayati* report (2024) highlights how administrative bias persists in civil registration, with many Marapu women facing difficulties in obtaining marriage, birth, and religious identity documents. This bureaucratic exclusion reflects a deeper structural issue: the state's failure to accommodate indigenous spiritual systems perpetuates women's invisibility within both customary and formal legal frameworks.

Institutional discrimination thus reinforces patriarchal hierarchies, granting legitimacy to male-centered customary authority and limiting women's access to legal and social recognition. The result is a condition of "double invisibility", in which Marapu women are marginalized simultaneously within their cultural and state contexts. Their experiences underscore the importance of viewing gender inequality not merely as a matter of tradition but as a systemic consequence of unequal power embedded in both cultural and legal institutions.

The forms of inequality identified above illustrate how the lived realities of Marapu women are shaped by intersecting systems of oppression, gender, belief, and state recognition. From a socio-legal perspective, the persistence of these inequalities demonstrates the limitations of formal legal equality in addressing discrimination within customary contexts. The law's inability to penetrate indigenous belief systems leaves women vulnerable to patriarchal authority structures that remain unchallenged by state mechanisms. From an intersectional feminist lens, the experiences of Marapu women reveal that gender subordination is compounded by religious and ethnic identity, which together define the contours of their marginalization. Their oppression cannot be disentangled from the broader structural hierarchies that govern both customary and national systems. Consequently, empowerment efforts must operate on two interconnected levels: within the cultural domain, by reinterpreting traditional norms to include women's agency, and through state-based reform, by ensuring institutional recognition and protection for indigenous women's rights.

Achieving gender justice within the Marapu community requires more than external intervention or normative prescriptions; it demands contextual transformation grounded in local cultural logic. As demonstrated by Lidda Mawomude's testimony, education plays a pivotal role in fostering gender consciousness and challenging entrenched hierarchies. Initiatives such as community education, participatory reinterpretation of *belis*, and women's inclusion in local cultural institutions can promote gradual but sustainable transformation. The framework of feminist legal pluralism provides a conceptual pathway for such transformation. Rather than rejecting customary traditions, this perspective recognizes women's capacity to negotiate power within them. By situating gender equality within Marapu's own moral and cosmological

framework, reform becomes an internal process of rebalancing rather than an external imposition. In this way, the pursuit of gender justice in Marapu society can reconcile the preservation of cultural identity with the realization of women's human rights.

Contradicting International Legal Instruments on Women's Right

According to Umbu Remi, during a focus group discussion (27 May 2024, East Sumba), *belis* is philosophically viewed not as a transaction exchanging a woman for goods. He further explained that when a woman marries and leaves her extended family, it creates a vacancy within that family unit, which must be honored with a form of appreciation. However, in contemporary times, the value of *belis* seems to have shifted from its original purpose of filling the gap within a family to being perceived more as a commercial transaction for the acquisition of women.⁴⁷

In the Marapu belief system, the *maramba-ata* structure is a long-standing social hierarchy of king and servant, preserved by Marapu adherents in East Sumba Regency to maintain social stratification and control over property, including the ownership of servants. Passed down through generations, the *maramba-ata* system is upheld through traditional Marapu ceremonies, such as marriage and funeral rituals, which are still practiced today.⁴⁸ We see that this caste-like structure establishes a hierarchy in which servants must follow the commands of the Maramba (king or noble), creating an embedded form of discrimination marked by specific rights and duties validated by Marapu beliefs. This structural discrimination affects various aspects of life outlined in the The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), including economic, social, and cultural rights. For instance, *ata* (servants) are obligated to follow the religious beliefs of the Maramba, limiting their freedom to choose their own faith. They are also unable to select their own spouses and are required to marry within the same *ata* class. The *maramba* controls nearly every aspect of *ata's* social, economic, and religious life. Furthermore, this patriarchal Marapu system places women in a subordinate position. This is contradict the ICESCR as an international agreement aimed at protecting the economic, social, and cultural rights necessary for a dignified life for all people worldwide.

Besides that class inequality contradict the ICESCR, the cultural construction of Marapu within Sumbanese society indirectly shapes the division of roles between men and women. Similar to the patriarchal cultures found in other Indigenous communities, patriarchy plays a significant role in Sumba in defining these roles.⁴⁹ The Sumbanese people believe that men, as heads of households,

⁴⁷ Nur Wahida Yusuf et al., "Belis in the Marriage of the Dawan Community in East Nusa Tenggara," *AL-MAIYYAH: Media Transformasi Gender Dalam Paradigma Sosial Keagamaan* 15, no. 1 (2022): 70–82.

⁴⁸ Amma et al., "Keberadaan Kasta Dalam Masyarakat Adat Di Sumba Timur Dalam Konteks Hak Asasi Manusia."

⁴⁹ Ekawati Suzanty Mbiliyora, "Kajian Sosio-Feminis terhadap Peran Perempuan dalam Budaya Pahamang (untuk Kematian) dalam Adat Sumba Timur" (Thesis, Program Studi Teologi FTEO-UKSW, 2017), <https://repository.uksw.edu/handle/123456789/13384>.

have full authority in decision-making. Traditionally, women are perceived to have no standing in matters of custom or religious ceremonies. While women do have roles, the prevailing belief in Sumba is that customary affairs belong to men; thus, women are relegated to managing only domestic matters during customary events or discussions.⁵⁰ Contrary to this view, Umbu Remi (27 May 2024, East Sumba), a chief in East Sumba Regency, states that although Marapu women predominantly participate in domestic spheres, this does not negate their involvement in decision-making related to customs. He emphasizes that women's participation is crucial in customary discussions. Before finalizing decisions during deliberations, male representatives will seek the approval or input of women. Even if women are in separate spaces, they still retain a voice in decision-making.⁵¹ However, there has yet to be a woman in the position of chief, or *rato*, which is generally held by older men from noble families.⁵² Based on these differing perspectives, women's participation in customary decision-making and religious rituals varies according to the traditions of each Marapu group. The role of a *rato* in facilitating spaces for women to express their views has been observed as significant. Cultural changes and processes of modernization appear to influence chiefs in creating opportunities for women's engagement. Observations also indicate that women's limited involvement in exercising political rights under Marapu belief and customary practices contrasts with the provisions of Article 3 of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women CPRW, particularly considering that Indigenous laws (*adat* law) are formally recognized as part of Indonesia's national legal framework.

The Marapu community, with its strong belief system and cultural values, upholds various traditions that impact women's position and rights. For instance, *belis* is a traditional practice in Marapu marriage where the groom's family provides a "bride price" in the form of livestock or other valuable items to the bride's family. Traditionally, *belis* is intended to solidify the bond between the two families and strengthen social unity. However, our findings indicate that this practice is often perceived as a heavy economic burden and risks treating women as "property" transferred between families, thereby diminishing women's rights to be viewed as equal individuals rather than mere objects in marriage. The continued presence of such practices in Marapu society demonstrates the significant challenges to implementing the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) due to customary practices that may reinforce gender inequality.

⁵⁰ Zefanya Here, "Perempuan dan Rumah Adat: Studi tentang Posisi dan Peran Perempuan dalam Perspektif Rumah Adat Sumba di Suku Loli, Kampung Tarung, Kabupaten Sumba Barat, Nusa Tenggara Timur" (Thesis, Program Studi Sosiologi FISKOM-UKSW, 2017), <https://repository.uksw.edu/handle/123456789/14716>.

⁵¹ Here, "Perempuan dan Rumah Adat."

⁵² F. D. Wellem, *Injil Dan Marapu: Suatu Studi Historis-Teologis Tentang Perjumpaan Injil Dengan Masyarakat Sumba Pada Periode 1876-1990*, Cet. 1 (BPK Gunung Mulia, 2004), 1876–990.

Conclusion

The analysis of gender inequality within the Marapu community reveals that women's subordination is not merely the product of cultural tradition but rather the outcome of intertwined socio-legal, economic, and institutional structures. The study demonstrates how patriarchal interpretations of Marapu cosmology, the commodification of *belis*, and women's exclusion from ritual and political spaces collectively sustain a deeply gendered social order. This inequality is further reinforced by the state's historical neglect of indigenous belief systems, which leaves Marapu women in a condition of dual marginalization, unrecognized both within customary hierarchies and in formal legal frameworks. Consequently, the struggle for gender justice in Sumba cannot be separated from the broader challenge of reconciling Indonesia's plural legal system with its commitment to human rights and gender equality.

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