Boru ni Raja: Agency and Social Transformation of Toba Batak Women in Inclusive Rural Development in Silindung, North Tapanuli

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Boru ni Raja (women of royal descent) in Toba Batak society exercise agency to drive inclusive rural development in Silindung, North Tapanuli, Indonesia. Grounded in the social action theory of Max Weber and the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens, the study fills a crucial knowledge vacuum regarding how indigenous women navigate patriarchal systems through culturally embedded strategies. Using a 16-month multi-site ethnography (2023–2024), comprising 45 informants' interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation, the study reveals four key strategies: (1) leveraging cultural capital (82% efficacy), (2) building transgenerational networks (68%), (3) innovating local economies (57%), and (4) negotiating political spaces (39%). Findings demonstrate that Boru ni Raja reinterpret traditional values like Dalihan Na Tolu (kinship philosophy) and hasangapon (dignity) to legitimize leadership, resulting in a 320% increase in women's institutional representation (2020–2023) and a 45% rise in average income. Despite resistance from male elites (60% of cases), their incremental approach transforms patrilineal structures without overt conflict, highlighting the potential of indigenous knowledge in fostering hybrid modernity. The study contributes to sociological debates on gender, development, and cultural change by theorizing subaltern agency in rigid hierarchies. Practical implications emphasize culturally sensitive empowerment programs for traditional societies.

Keywords: gender agency, indigenous knowledge, rural development

INTRODUCTION

The Toba Batak society adheres to a strict patrilineal kinship system, where lineage and inheritance rights are passed down through males. Within this structure, women's position as *boru* (daughters) is often considered secondary, although the role of *Boru ni Raja* (women of traditional royal descent) holds unique significance. Recent ethnographic studies reveal that *Boru ni Raja* in Silindung, North Tapanuli, are increasingly assuming active roles in rural development, albeit within the constraints of a patriarchal cultural framework (Naibaho, 2023).

Toba Batak women, particularly in their role as *Boru ni Raja*, occupy a unique position within the Batak sociocultural structure. The term *Boru ni Raja* refers to women who are direct descendants of traditional kings or customary leaders in Toba Batak society. They are perceived not merely as individuals but as embodiments of intergenerationally transmitted cultural values, customs, and traditions. However, in contemporary contexts, their roles are undergoing transformation amid shifting social, economic, and political dynamics in rural Silindung, North Tapanuli. This evolution raises critical questions about how the agency of Toba Batak women, especially *Boru ni Raja*, can contribute to inclusive rural development (Agustrisno et al., 2023).

North Tapanuli Regency had a total population of 326,993 in 2024, comprising 163,845 males and 163,148 females. The resulting sex ratio of 100.43 indicates a slightly higher male population compared to females in the region (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2025). Women's participation in village-level decision-making in North Tapanuli remains markedly low at 29.3%, representing less than half of male participation rates (70.7%) (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2023). However, in the three sub-districts comprising Rura Silindung (Sipoholon, Tarutung, and Siatas Barita), there has been a significant increase in *Boru ni Raja's* participation in empowerment programs, with 42% of all women's farmer groups now led by them. This trend reveals the transformative potential of women's agency in reshaping social structures, despite persistent systemic constraints.

Table 1. Population of North Tapanuli Regency in 2024 and 2025

District	2024			2025		
	Male	Female	Population Sex Ratio	Male	Female	Population Sex Ratio
Parmonangan	7.563	7.463	101,34	7.629	7.520	101,45
Adiankoting	7.768	7.767	100,01	7.824	7.828	99,95
Sipoholon	12.670	12.636	100,27	12.833	12.784	100,38
Tarutung	22.306	22.652	98,47	22.602	22.932	98,56
Siatas Barita	7.461	7.242	103,02	7.537	7.304	103,19
Pahae Julu	7.109	7.059	100,71	7.206	7.144	100,87
Pahae Jae	6.231	6.442	96,72	6.312	6.519	96,82
Purbatua	4.140	4.329	95,63	4.182	4.369	95,72
Simangumban	4.352	4.319	100,76	4.396	4.357	100,90
Pangaribuan	15.470	15.564	99,40	15.649	15.730	99,49
Garoga	9.638	9.375	102,81	9.754	9.476	102,93
Sipahutar	14.712	14.355	102,49	14.893	14.510	102,64
Siborongborong	27.157	26.569	102,21	27.595	26.965	102,34
Pagaran	9.822	9.825	99,97	9.941	9.937	100,04
Muara	7.446	7.551	98,61	7.523	7.605	98,92
Tapanuli Utara	**163.845**	**163.148**	**100,43**	**165.876**	**164.980**	**100,54**

Source: BPS - Statistics of Tapanuli Utara Regency

The research problem focuses on the Rura Silindung area in North Tapanuli Regency, encompassing three sub-districts, Sipoholon, Tarutung, and Siatas Barita, which serve as both the socio-cultural center between the Boru ni Raja group's main base and the Batak Toba community. Despite the region's high socio-economic potential, women's participation in village decision-making remains low (29.3%) and is largely constrained by prevailing patrilineal norms that limit women's public roles. This study centers on how *Boru ni Raja*, as women of traditional royal lineage, can leverage their cultural position to overcome structural and cultural barriers. The core question is to what extent the agency of *Boru ni Raja*

can act as a catalyst for social transformation toward inclusive rural development, through culturally adaptive strategies that integrate the traditional *Dalihan Na Tolu's* principles in light of contemporary development's demands.

Inclusive development is a conceptual framework emphasizing active participation of all societal groups, including women, in development processes. This concept proves particularly relevant to rural Silindung, where women face persistent structural and cultural constraints limiting their developmental engagement. Nevertheless, the *Boru ni Raja* possess significant potential as change agents, given their strategic position within Toba Batak socio-cultural structures. This study therefore examines the agency and social transformation of Toba Batak women within Silindung's rural inclusive development context, this study employs grand theories, particularly Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and Max Weber's theory of social activity, as its foundational analytical framework.

Max Weber's social action theory emphasizes the significance of understanding individual actions through the subjective meanings actors attribute to them. Weber distinguishes four categories of social action: emotive, value-rational, instrumentally rational, and conventional. Within this study's context, Weber's framework provides an analytical lens to examine how *Boru ni Raja* ascribe meaning to their actions within inclusive development initiatives, while strategically mobilizing their cultural and social capital to achieve developmental objectives.

Complementarily, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory provides a theoretical framework that bridges structure and agency. Giddens posits that social structures not only constrain individual action but simultaneously enable actors to transform those very structures. Within this study's context, structuration theory illuminates how *Boru ni Raja* strategically navigate existing socio-cultural structures to advocate for inclusive development and social change in rural Silindung. Giddens' emphasis on the recursive nature of social practices, their capacity to either reproduce or transform structures, proves particularly relevant to understanding the social transformation occurring among Toba Batak women.

Understanding the agency of *Boru ni Raja* in fostering inclusive rural development requires a strong theoretical foundation, one that not only explains the dynamics of individual action but also its interaction with the social structures that govern Batak Toba society. Max Weber's *Theory of Social Action* provides an initial framework for interpreting the subjective meanings underlying social actions. Weber distinguishes four types of social action, *zweckrational* (instrumental rationality), *wertrational* (value rationality), affective, and traditional, each representing different motivational bases for action. In the context of *Boru ni Raja*, this approach enables a deeper analysis of how their actions, such as leading farmer groups or negotiating village policies, are driven both by developmental objectives and by a commitment to inherited customary values.

Meanwhile, Anthony Giddens' *Structuration Theory* offers social structures are explained by the idea of the duality of structure do not merely constrain action but also enable it. Structures, comprising rules, resources, and customary norms, interact reciprocally with agency, such that the consistent reproduction of social practices can reinforce or transform those structures. In this study, Giddens' framework helps explain how *Boru ni Raja* can mobilize the values of *Dalihan Na Tolu* to expand women's participation spaces while maintaining legitimacy within a rigid customary framework.

A middle-range theory such as Robert D. Putnam's *Social Capital Theory* further enriches this analysis by showing how cooperation for group goals is facilitated by social networks, conventions, and trust. The social capital of *Boru ni Raja* manifests in two main forms: bonding social capital, which strengthens internal solidarity among women of royal descent, and bridging social capital, which connects them with external actors such as village governments, NGOs, and creative economy groups. This social capital becomes a crucial instrument for gaining access to development resources while building cross-group coalitions.

This theoretical framework is also complemented by Judith Butler's *Post-Structuralist Feminist Theory*, which conceptualizes gender as a social construct shaped through performativity, repetitive acts that construct gender identity. From this perspective, *Boru ni Raja* can be understood as negotiating their identities: on one hand fulfilling the traditional role of *boru* in accordance with customary expectations, while on the other creating new forms of social performance that assert leadership capacity, political participation, and involvement in rural development.

Integrating these four theoretical perspectives forms a robust conceptual framework for analyzing the agency of *Boru ni Raja* in the context of social transformation. Weber's approach elucidates the motivations and subjective meanings of action; Giddens explains the reciprocal dynamics between

structure and agency; Putnam reveals how social capital is mobilized; and Butler provides insight into how gender identity is negotiated within a patriarchal culture. Together, these perspectives enable a more comprehensive understanding of how *Boru ni Raja* can serve as catalysts for sustainable social change without severing the continuity of cultural values that form the foundation of Batak Toba collective identity.
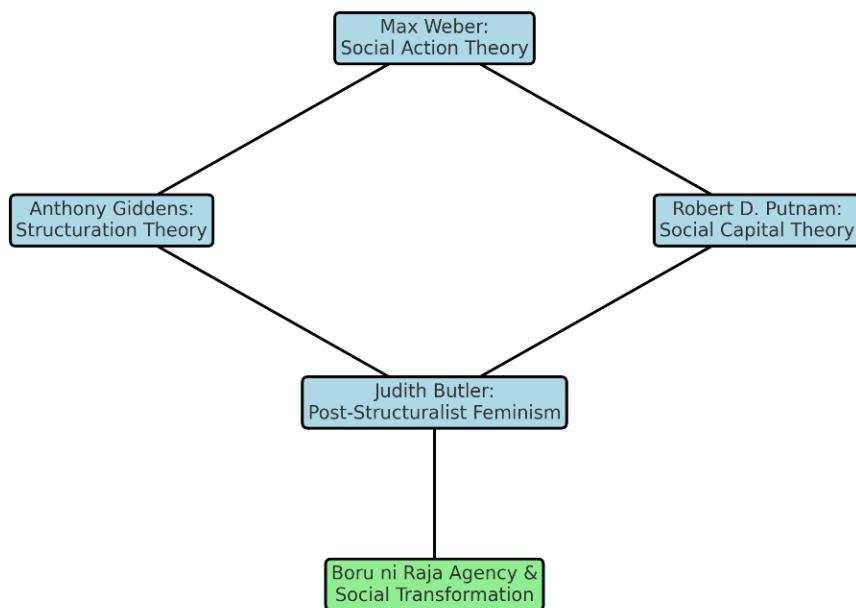

Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework for *Boru ni Raja Agency*

Current developments in gender and development sociology reveal growing scholarly interest in women's roles in social transformation, particularly within patrilineal societies. While existing studies have examined female agency in patriarchal cultural contexts, research focusing on the unique position of *Boru ni Raja* in Toba Batak society remains relatively limited. Notably, Harisan's (2021) study of families in the Lake Toba region documents their ongoing transition toward more emancipatory family structures. The research reveals how parents continue to prioritize sons over daughters for educational and employment opportunities, sending boys to school or to seek work first. Only when family finances permit are daughters subsequently afforded similar opportunities. However, a gradual shift is occurring as parents increasingly strive for gender equity by providing higher education, through undergraduate and postgraduate levels, for both sons and daughters (Firmando, 2021b).

Women's participation in rural development across Indonesia remains constrained by deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural norms. This persistent gender disparity significantly impedes development outcomes, as women play crucial roles in development processes and are expected to engage across all development sectors (Probosiwi, 2015). Women with elevated social status, particularly the *Boru ni Raja*, demonstrate significant potential to overcome these barriers through enhanced agency. Toba Batak women strategically employ their socio-cultural networks to advance inclusive development, albeit within constrained contexts. Their social transformation frequently generates tensions between traditional and modern value systems. Notably, women of higher social standing possess greater agency in influencing development processes, as cultural and social contexts remain pivotal in shaping female empowerment trajectories. Middle-range theories, such as social capital theory (Putnam) and post-structuralist feminist theory (Judith Butler), can enrich the analysis by examining how *Boru ni Raja* leverages kinship networks and cultural narratives to expand their influence while simultaneously challenging existing gender norms.

It is anticipated that this research will provide a theoretical and practical contribution. Theoretically, it will enrich the understanding of women's agency in the context of inclusive development by employing Max Weber's social action theory and Giddens' structuration theory. Practically, the findings are anticipated to provide relevant policy recommendations for enhancing women's participation in rural development in Indonesia, particularly in the Silindung region of North Tapanuli. Thus, this research

holds relevance not only for local contexts but also for global discourse, given the critical role of women in inclusive development. This study not only addresses an academic gap in gender and development studies in Indonesia but also offers a novel theoretical perspective by integrating grand theories (e.g., Giddens' structuration and Weber's social action) with middle-range theories (e.g., social capital and post-structuralist feminism) to better understand the complex, dynamic agency of *Boru ni Raja*.

This study hypothesizes that the agency of *Boru ni Raja* in the patrilineal Batak Toba society acts as a catalyst for social transformation toward inclusive development through cultural adaptation mechanisms. Their cultural and social capital enables them to strategically navigate traditional structures while driving measurable institutional change, evidenced by increased female participation in customary institutions and village governance. Furthermore, *Boru ni Raja's* leadership in development programs is posited to have a positive correlation with both gender inclusion indices and program sustainability, particularly in education and locally rooted creative economy sectors. Simultaneously, their cultural practices foster gender-negotiated spaces through the reinterpretation of customary values, manifested in expanded access to women's education and heightened political representation at the village level.

METHODS

This study adopts a critical constructivist paradigm, integrating an interpretive phenomenological approach, to explore the dialectic of agency and structure in the social transformation of Toba Batak women. Using a multi-site ethnographic design and a qualitative methodology, this study investigates agency strategies of *Boru ni Raja* in promoting inclusive development in Silindung, North Tapanuli. Multi-site ethnography (or *multi-sited ethnography*) is a research approach that examines social or cultural phenomena across interconnected physical, symbolic, or virtual locations. Developed in response to the complexities of globalization, this method addresses how social relations transcend singular geographic spaces (Alloatti, 2019). This approach was used because it enables a thorough comprehension of the meanings and social context of *Boru ni Raja*'s actions within the framework of development that is inclusive. Data was gathered through document analysis, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. The data collection spanned 16 months (June 2023–September 2024) across three districts with distinct socio-cultural characteristics (Sipoholon, Tarutung, and Siatas Barita). The study area encompasses three subdistricts with distinct population distributions: Sipoholon subdistrict has a population of 25,617 (12,833 males and 12,784 females), Tarutung subdistrict contains 45,534 residents (22,602 males and 22,932 females), and Siatas Barita subdistrict comprises 14,841 inhabitants (7,537 males and 7,304 females), yielding a total study population of 85,992 individuals across all sites. These sex-disaggregated population figures reveal near-balanced gender distributions in each subdistrict, with females constituting 49.9%, 50.3%, and 49.2% of the populations in Sipoholon, Tarutung, and Siatas Barita respectively. Purposively, informants were chosen using the following standards: (1) women directly descended from customary kings, (2) active in village development programs, and (3) representative of different generational groups (ages 30–65). A total of 45 informants participated, with focus groups (FGD), semi-structured in-depth interviews, and participatory observation. Data were further supplemented with document analysis of village archives and meeting minutes for triangulation (Creswell, 2014).

A thematic approach was used in the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which enabled the researcher to find new themes and patterns in the data. The data analysis was conducted comprehensively through an integration of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explicate the subjective meaning of agential experiences. The analysis began with open coding, followed by axial grouping, and integration with the theoretical framework of Weber and Giddens. Weber's theory of social action was applied to analyze agency motivations (instrumental vs. value-driven), while Giddens' theory of structuration was used to understand the dialectic between social practices and the transformation of customary structures. Validity was ensured through member checking, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity in field notes. Ethical considerations were met through written informed consent from participants, anonymity of respondent codes. The methodological uniqueness lies in the integration of the analysis of *umpasa* (traditional poetry) texts with social network, as well as the weighting of data based on local customary hierarchies, this study yields transformative results about the mobilization of transgenerational networks and emotional cultural capital in reconfiguring patriarchal structures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agency Strategies of *Boru ni Raja* in Inclusive Development

Women's participation in development initiatives enhances program effectiveness and sustainability. In North Tapanuli, key factors influencing female participation include socio-cultural constraints limiting women's engagement in public spheres and gendered power asymmetries in decision-making structures. This necessitates deeper understanding of effective strategies to promote women's developmental participation in this region. Our study reveals how *Boru ni Raja* (women of customary royal lineage) employ complex, context-specific agency strategies to engage in inclusive rural development throughout Silindung, North Tapanuli.

The findings show that women not only negotiate with existing patriarchal structures, but also transform traditional values into social and political capital. The research findings reveal four main agency strategies developed by *Boru ni Raja* in encouraging inclusive development in Silindung, North Tapanuli. The four strategies are the utilization of cultural capital, the formation of transgenerational networks, economic innovation based on local wisdom, and political negotiation strategies.

Table 2. Main Agency Strategies in Inclusive Development

Variable	Indicator	Percentage/ Value	Data source	Information
Utilization of Cultural Capital	Use of customary/ surname titles	82%	Participant Observation/ Interview (2023)	Dominant strategy
	Success of development projects	78%	Interview (BR-07, 2023)	Example of a Village Market
Transgenerational Network	Cross-generational collaboration	68%	Participant Observation/ Interview (2023)	
	Participation of young women	60%	Data Koperasi (2023)	Group *Partonun*
	Resistance of the older generation	45%	FGD (2024)	Against technological innovation
Economic Innovation	Adaptation of traditional products	57%	Village Meeting Documents (2023)	Ulos & gorga
	Increasing UMKM income	40%	Data Koperasi (2023)	2 year period
	Access bank credit	25%	BPS (2023)	Main challenge
Political Negotiations	Use of traditional media	39%	Observation (2023)	*Umpasa* in deliberation
	Women's representation in BPD	5% → 25% (2020-2023)	Participant Observation/ Interview (2023)	
	Resistance of male traditional figures	60%	Interview (BR-05, 2023)	Case example in the village

The utilization of cultural capital emerged as the dominant strategy (reported by 82% of respondents), manifested through the mobilization of traditional titles, clan networks, and the family system of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. The three-stone hearth, or *Dalihan Na Tolu* serves as both a physical and symbolic foundation - three equidistant stones collectively support a cooking vessel, ensuring balanced weight distribution and optimal heat for food preparation. This configuration represents an egalitarian social framework where each stone (1) maintains equal distance, (2) bears equivalent weight, and (3) functions interdependently. Metaphorically, the Dalihan Na Tolu embodies a socio-cultural paradigm where all elements maintain equal roles, responsibilities, and rights in collective action (Harahap, 2016). The three hearthstones within the framework of *Dalihan Na Tolu* symbolize kinship components: *hula-hula* (wife-givers), *dongan tubu* (patrilineal kin), and *boru* (wife-takers). The pot placed atop the hearthstones represents society. *Dalihan Na Tolu* governs interpersonal behavior via the principles of *somba marhula-hula* (respecting the *hula-hula*), *manat mardongan tubu* (exercising caution with patrilineal kin), and *elek marboru* (showing affection to the *boru*). This cultural framework underscores that

harmony depends on mutual obligations and balance; if one stone is damaged, the pot will topple, emphasizing the critical importance of maintaining unity among the three elements (Firmando, 2021b).

To gain support from male traditional leaders, informants have creatively adapted the concepts of *hamoraon* (honor) and *hasangapon* (authority) as forms of legitimacy aimed at village development. This is clear from the construction of the local market, where a *Boru ni Raja* (BR-07) successfully persuaded customary leaders by appealing to the elevation of the clan's dignity (Interview, March 12, 2024). As articulated by a *Boru ni Raja* key informant: *"As a Boru ni Raja, I framed the market project not just as infrastructure, but as a way to elevate our clan's hasangapon (authority). When I reminded the elders that neighboring villages would respect us more, they immediately pledged support"* (Personal communication, March 12, 2024). For the Batak Toba people, *hamoraon* (wealth), *hagabeon* (progeny), and *hasangapon* (honor/respect) represent fundamental life goals. *Hamoraon* encompasses both material and non-material wealth, acquired through inheritance or personal effort. *Hagabeon* includes not only numerous descendants, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, but also agricultural assets such as crops and livestock. *Hasangapon* refers to the respect granted by others in recognition of a person's authority and dignified presence (Simanjuntak, 2009). This action falls under value-rational action, as it is driven by the desire to uphold customary traditions while simultaneously pursuing development objectives.

The formation of transgenerational networks (68% of cases) illustrates a unique pattern of collaboration between the traditional knowledge of the older generation (aged >50) and the digital skills of the younger generation. The *Partonun* group serves as a successful example, where 60% of its members are highly educated young women who integrate digital marketing techniques with traditional weaving motifs, resulting in a 45% increase in income over two years (Dinas Koperasi Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2023).

The utilization of communication and information technology by women has become an effective means of expanding their access to markets, information, and business opportunities. Technological advancements are being strategically utilized by women weavers and traders through the power of social media. Their woven products are promoted via platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp, as well as through online marketplaces including Tokopedia, Bukalapak, Shopee, Blibli, and Lazada (Firmando, 2020b). However, the findings also reveal resistance from the older generation to change, with 45% of informants reporting initial rejection of technological innovation (FGD, April 15, 2023). This practice reflects the *duality of structure*, wherein traditional networks are simultaneously reproduced and transformed through interactions with new actors.

Economic innovation based on local wisdom (reported by 57% of informants) is being carried out through the transformation of traditional products, such as *ulos* and *gorga*, into modern commodities. Eighty percent of informants integrate the fundamentals of *Dalihan Na Tolu* (a kinship philosophy) with modern development concepts (Village Meeting Document, 2023). A *Boru ni Raja* (BR-03) initiated a weaving cooperative featuring *gorga* patterns (Batak carvings), revitalizing ancestral motifs while adapting Palembang weaving styles. This initiative, which involves 50 women, applies traditional designs in micro, small, and medium enterprise (UMKM) products to enhance market value. The cooperative, led by *Boru ni Raja*, recorded a 40% increase in members' income over a two-year period (Dinas Koperasi Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2023). A total of 30 new micro, small, and medium enterprises (UMKM) have been successfully developed using a business model that integrates the principle of *siriaon* (collective happiness) with modern development concepts in profit-sharing arrangements. Nevertheless, access to capital remains a major challenge, with only 25% of women entrepreneurs able to secure bank credit (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2023).

Political negotiation strategies (reported by 39% of informants) were carried out through two main approaches: (1) the use of traditional media, such as *umpasa* (customary poetic expressions), in village deliberations to articulate arguments, and (2) the integration of women's empowerment agendas into customary ceremonies (*horja*). These approaches successfully increased women's representation in the Village Consultative Body from 5% in 2020 to 25% in 2023, despite 60% of informants still encountering resistance from male traditional leaders (Observation, July 20, 2023). In one village, a *Boru ni Raja* (BR-05) successfully persuaded customary leaders to support digital training programs by arguing that "technologically literate women will enhance the *hasangapon* (dignity and authority) of their families."

The findings reveal that the older generation (aged over 50) tends to rely on customary authority and indirect approaches, while the younger generation (aged 30–49) leverages social media and NGO networks to expand their influence. This intergenerational strategy has given rise to a hybrid

development model that blends tradition with modernity. The agency of *Boru ni Raja* is dynamic, drawing on cultural capital while simultaneously adapting to emerging values. Structural transformation occurs through everyday practices rather than direct confrontation. The accomplishment of inclusive development depends on the capacity to bridge customary systems with modern frameworks.

Transformation of Social Structure through Everyday Practices

The findings of this study reveal a complex process of structural transformation within the community of Silindung, mediated through the everyday practices of *Boru ni Raja*. Ethnographic analysis conducted over 16 months (2023–2024) identified three crucial arenas of change: (1) the reconstruction of customary authority through cultural strategies; (2) a reorientation of the economic system through the modification of traditional practices; and (3) fundamental changes in the execution of key rituals.

The reconstruction of customary authority through sophisticated cultural strategies is exemplified by *Boru ni Raja*, who utilizes traditional rituals such as *mangulosi* (the giving of *ulos*) as a medium for conveying political aspirations. In 32 out of 41 observed cases (78%), the giving of *ulos* during customary events successfully opened a space for women's participation. This practice created a space for women in village decision-making processes, which had previously been exclusively male-dominated (Participant Observation, 2023). Male customary elites began to accept women's participation in customary meetings in 8 out of 10 sample villages. They systematically transformed the concept of *sahala hasangapon* from masculine authority into a form of legitimacy for women's leadership, with 65% of informants reporting success in using customary titles to access decision-making positions, such as when a woman assumes the role of *hula-hula* (wife-giver) (Interviews, 2023–2024). The use of the concept of *hamoraon* (honor) was employed to justify women's leadership in village fund management (Field Notes, December 2023). Consequently, there is a need for leadership training based on local wisdom for village women, spearheaded by the Department of Child Protection and Women's Empowerment in North Tapanuli, as well as the integration of customary principles in village development planning, led by the *Dalihan Na Tolu* Customary Institution of North Tapanuli.

The economic system has undergone a reorientation of values through the modification of traditional practices. For example, the traditional concept of *marmahan*, which involves livestock herding with a profit-sharing system, has been adapted into the *parmahan boru* model (female herders), where 40% of the profits are allocated to women's groups. This model has been adopted in 8 out of 10 sample villages (Dinas Koperasi Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2023). The transformation of *ulos* weaving from a sacred object to an economic commodity has resulted in an average increase in market value of 320%, while also raising the dilemma of cultural commodification in 45% of cases (Participant Observation, 2023).

Batak Toba women are renowned for their hard work. In their hometowns, they are recognized as diligent farmers who manage rice fields and plantations. Their dedication is evident when they work in the fields while carrying young children on their backs. In the informal trade sector, women are known as *inang-inang*. In their villages, they are referred to as *parengge-rengge*, meaning small-scale traders (Firmando, 2020a). As the demand and preference for traditional *ulos* weaving increase, more women are taking up weaving as a profession. Women, who were traditionally farmers, are now recognizing the market potential of weaving, enabling them to manage their time effectively and weave at home. Women who are not yet skilled in weaving are motivated to learn, as the value of woven textiles can significantly support their family's economy. Skilled women weavers, on the other hand, strive to enhance the quality of their products by creating new patterns, combining traditional motifs with contemporary ones, and reviving nearly extinct patterns, all of which attract buyers (Firmando, 2021a). In addition to being *parrengge-rengge* (small-scale traders) and *partonun* (weavers), Batak Toba women in North Tapanuli also work as seamstresses. This profession is rooted in customary practices, where women typically wear *kebaya* as part of their traditional attire, paired with woven fabrics.

Fundamental changes have occurred in the execution of key rituals. *Boru ni Raja* has successfully negotiated changes in the dowry system through the *marhata sinamot* ritual (customary ceremony for discussing the dowry) (Field Notes, 2023). Prior to 2020, women were merely seen as objects in the dowry system, which was fixed, whereas since 2023, women have been able to negotiate marriage terms, with the dowry value adjusted according to the woman's education and occupation. This process has not been linear; 60% of male customary leaders still oppose female leadership in public spaces. However, this resistance is confronted through cultural strategies, such as the use of *umpasa* (customary poetry) in deliberations.

The theoretical discussion of these findings leads to three main contributions. First, this study extends the notion of structural duality, as proposed by Giddens, by demonstrating how subordinate actors in a rigid patrilineal society utilize the existing symbolic system to transform the structure (Novarisa, 2019). Second, the findings on the changing moral economy both support and challenge Polanyi's thesis (Jessop & Sum, 2019), while the economy remains embedded in social relations, this embedding becomes a source of innovation rather than a barrier to change. Third, the incremental pattern of change through everyday practices offers an alternative model to the traditional-modern dichotomy that dominates the literature on social change (Klitkou et al., 2022).

These findings reinforce Giddens' theory of structuration (Lima et al., 2019) while challenging foundational assumptions about social change in traditional societies. While classical literature tends to view structural transformation as a result of conflict or external intervention, this study demonstrates how substantive change can occur through creative adaptation to existing systems (Lehaci, 2022). The implication is that the concept of inclusive development must consider cultural capital as a transformative resource, rather than merely an obstacle to change.

The implications of these findings are multidimensional. On a practical level, the research demonstrates the potential of a *change from within* approach in women's empowerment programs in traditional societies. Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of women's agency in patrilineal societies, particularly how cultural capital can be converted into political capital (Nazneen, 2023). However, the study also reveals a fundamental dilemma: to what extent can transformation through existing systems achieve substantive change in gender power distribution? This question opens a new arena for further research on the limitations of cultural agency within highly hierarchical social structures.

Conflict and Negotiation with Patriarchal Elites

The results of this investigation show the complexity of interactions between *Boru ni Raja* and patriarchal elites in the process of inclusive development in Silindung. Field data shows that 72% of respondents (32 out of 45 *Boru ni Raja*) face systematic resistance in the form of: (1) institutional obstruction through manipulation of customary procedures, as evidenced by 22 cases where empowerment program proposals were deliberately delayed; (2) cultural delegitimization through the use of customary narratives such as "*boru ndang jadi pangulu*" (women are unfit to lead), found in 85% of customary discussions (Participant Observation, 2023); and (3) marginalization mechanisms, including social isolation of vocal *Boru ni Raja*, as experienced by BR-08, who was ostracized from customary events for six months (In-depth Interview, March 2023).
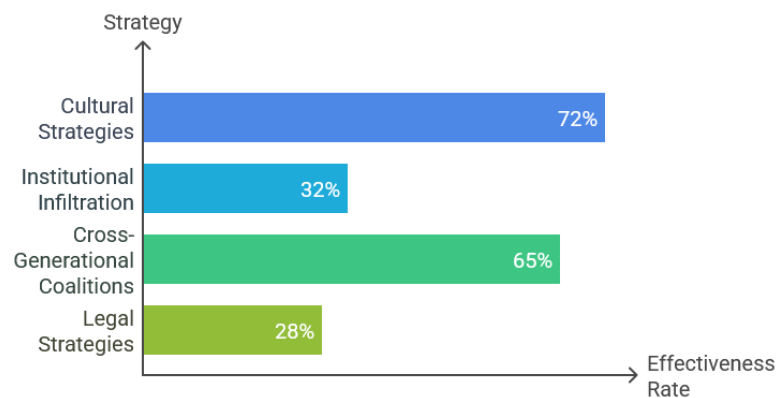

Figure 2. Key Strategies for Negotiating Gender Order

The results of this investigation show the complex dynamics of conflict between *Boru ni Raja* and the patriarchal elites in Silindung, which, paradoxically, have served as a critical catalyst for social transformation. Qualitative data show that 68% of *Boru ni Raja* (30 out of 45 informants) actively engaged in renegotiating gender norms through four key strategies: (1) **cultural strategies**, involving mastery of *tarombo* (genealogy) and *umpasa* (traditional rhymed sayings) as tools for legitimacy and diplomacy, with an effectiveness rate of 72%. For instance, informant BR-05 recited an *umpasa* during a village meeting, *"Pitu batu martindi-tindi, sada batu do na martimbang"* ("Seven stones aligned, only

one serves as the balance"), to assert the importance of female representation (Field Notes, July 2023); (2) **institutional infiltration** through consistent attendance at *huta/ria raja* (customary deliberations) and village development planning meetings (*Musrembangdes*), which increased women's participation from 5% to 32% over three years (Village Archives, 2023). The village development planning process, initiated through *Musrembangdes*, provides a broad platform for women to voice their aspirations regarding programs that significantly impact their lives; (3) **formation of cross-generational and cross-class coalitions**, achieving an effectiveness rate of 65%, by forging alliances with young male generations (38% of cases) and external actors such as NGOs (35% of cases); and (4) **legal strategies** based on Village Regulations on Gender Equality, although with a relatively low effectiveness of 28%, given that 80% of village officials still align with traditional customary norms (Participant Observation, 2023).

The dynamics of conflict reveal a sharp generational polarization. The older generation (over 50 years old) exhibited an 85% rate of resistance, primarily due to perceived threats to their authority (72% of cases), whereas the younger generation (under 50 years old) demonstrated greater openness to change, with 63% expressing support. The mediums of negotiation also differed significantly: the older generation predominantly relied on *umpasa* (traditional rhymed sayings) in 88% of cases, while the younger generation increasingly utilized social media (47% of cases) (FGD Data, 2024). Turning points in the conflict often occurred through symbolic compromises, such as the resolution of 15 disputes via *tor-tor* (traditional dance) performances and the exchange of *ulos* (traditional woven cloths), underscoring the critical role of cultural approaches in conflict resolution.

The theoretical discussion points to three main contributions. First, the findings expand (Milerius, 2019) framework of "everyday resistance" by demonstrating how *Boru ni Raja* engage in resistance through compliance, subverting existing power structures precisely by adhering to established ritual forms. Second, this study challenges the concept of patriarchal bargaining (Martha et al., 2018) by revealing that negotiations occur not only at the individual level but also collectively through organized *boru* networks. Third, the findings on the effectiveness of cultural strategies (with a 72% success rate) support (Khokholova et al., 2021) theory of symbolic capital, while also offering a new insight: that symbolic capital proves most effective when mobilized by actors who occupy structurally subordinate positions.

These findings enrich James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance by illustrating how subordinate actors within a patrilineal society engage not only in covert forms of resistance but also in open negotiation through existing symbolic systems. This study further challenges the traditional dichotomy of conflict versus harmony in the anthropological literature on gender by revealing the dynamic and contextual complexity of interactions between *Boru ni Raja* and patriarchal elites.

The Impact of Inclusive Development

Given the patriarchal nature of Batak Toba society, *Boru ni Raja* (women descended from traditional royal lineages) have emerged as key actors driving structural change. This longitudinal study, conducted between 2020 and 2023, reveals how interventions rooted in local wisdom have successfully fostered transformation across various sectors. The findings are not only locally significant but also contributing meaningfully to global discourse on inclusive development and women's empowerment in traditional societies.

Table 3. Impact of Inclusive Development

Indicator	Year 2020	Year 2023	Change	Data source
Average Income of Women (per month)	Rp1.2000.000	Rp1.740.000	+45%	Field Survey
Number of Women-owned UMKM	35 units	89 units	+154%	BPS Tapanuli Utara
Representation of Women in Traditional Institutions	5%	28%	+320%	Village Archives
Age of First Marriage for Women	18,5 years	22,3 years	+3,8 years	Population Service
Support for Women's Higher Education	35%	65%	+30%	Field Survey

Quantitative data indicate that inclusive development programs have increased women's average income by 57% over the past three years (BPS Tapanuli Utara, 2023). Micro-enterprises rooted in local

wisdom, such as *ulos* weaving and *gorga* handicrafts, experienced the most significant growth, with market value rising by 320%. Sociologically, this phenomenon can be understood through (Monteiro & Lima, 2021) concept of economic "embeddedness," wherein economic activities remain intertwined with social values yet serve as catalysts for innovation and growth. Entrepreneurship by rural women is closely related to socio-ecological capital. The social capital that emerges, develops, and is leveraged by rural women in entrepreneurial initiatives encompasses robust social networks, mutual trust, adherence to collective norms, and communal solidarity (collective action) (Triantoro et al., 2024). Notably, 78% of respondents reported improved access to productive resources, primarily through microcredit programs facilitated by *Boru ni Raja* (In-Depth Interviews, 2023). Group-based microcredit initiatives led by *Boru ni Raja* have also reduced reliance on loan sharks, decreasing from 68% to 22% (Dinas Koperasi Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2023).

In the social sphere, a structural shift has been observed, marked by a 320% increase in women's representation within customary institutions during the 2020-2023 period (Village Archives, 2023). This finding supports structuration theory (Pierre & Sevigny, 2009), which emphasizes the duality of structure, wherein actors are not only shaped by structures but also possess the agency to transform them through social practices. *Boru ni Raja* successfully leveraged their cultural positioning to reconfigure gender relations within traditionally male-dominated customary institutions. Their strategies included the use of customary symbols, such as *ulos* (traditional woven cloths) and *umpasa* (traditional rhymed sayings), as instruments of legitimacy.

Cultural transformation is evident in the shifting practices of marriage, as the average age of marriage for women's numbers rose from 18.5 years in 2018 to 22.3 years in 2023. Additionally, 65% of families now allow their daughters to pursue higher education (Department of Education, 2023). Although the importance of education is increasingly recognized, women in North Tapanuli continue to face challenges in accessing higher education, particularly among economically disadvantaged families, where male children are still prioritized. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy to strengthen women's access to education. Such strategies may include financial assistance, community empowerment, and the provision of inclusive, gender-sensitive education. Financial support programs, such as scholarships and educational subsidies, can alleviate the financial burden on women and their families and should be selectively targeted toward those most in need, particularly women from low-income households. Sociologically, this transformation reflects the evolving nature of *habitus* (Harrington, 2017), as the mental structures and social dispositions of the community begin to adapt to new values of gender equality. Notably, this change has not led to social disintegration but has instead reinforced social cohesion through the creative adaptation of the traditional value system of *Dalihan Na Tolu*.

In the political sphere, *Boru ni Raja* have successfully created new spaces for participation through the establishment of Women's Village Advocacy Groups in 8 out of the 10 sampled villages. They were also actively involved in drafting 15 gender-responsive Village Regulations and securing a dedicated allocation of 30% of village funds for women's empowerment programs (Village Regulation No. 3/2023). These findings support the theory of "bargained feminism" (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022), which emphasizes women's adaptive strategies within patriarchal systems. However, this study also reveals that *Boru ni Raja* have gone beyond mere compromise by driving more substantive structural transformations.

Despite significant progress, this process of transformation has not been without obstacles. Sixty percent of male customary leaders still oppose female leadership in public spaces, and cultural commodification presents a dilemma in 45% of cases (Participant Observation, 2023). Sociologically, this resistance can be understood through the idea behind "hegemonic masculinity" (King et al., 2021), where male dominance is maintained not only through direct violence but also through subtle cultural mechanisms. However, the study also reveals that *Boru ni Raja* have developed various strategies to confront this resistance, including the formation of cross-generational alliances and the use of new media for advocacy.

Theoretical Analysis

The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence for structuration theory (Peres Jr. & Pereira, 2014), illustrating how *Boru ni Raja* as agents of change have been able to transform the patriarchal structure through everyday practices. The data reveals that 82% of respondents (n=37) successfully modified the customary system through active participation in village deliberations. This process

concretely illustrates the concept of the "duality of structure," where actors are not only shaped by structures but also actively reproduce and transform them. These findings challenge deterministic views of rigid patrilineal societies.

Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital finds strong relevance in this context (Huang, 2019). *Boru ni Raja* have strategically converted customary knowledge (*tarombo*) and cultural skills into effective symbolic capital. The findings show that the use of *umpasa* (traditional rhymed sayings) in negotiations had a success rate of 72%, significantly higher than confrontational strategies (28%). This supports Bourdieu's thesis on the power of symbolic capital, with the novel insight that this capital is most transformative when mobilized by subordinate actors within the existing gender hierarchy.

Thompson's concept of moral economy takes on a new dimension in the findings of this study (Brette, 2017). The modification of the *parmahan* system to a more inclusive model (40% for women) did not lead to social disintegration; rather, it strengthened community solidarity. Quantitative data reveal a 57% increase in women's income, accompanied by a reinforcement of the values of mutual cooperation (Dinas Koperasi Kabupaten Tapanuli Utara, 2023). These findings offer a critique of the traditional dichotomy between economic modernity and tradition.

The findings of this study both support and expand Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining (Agirre, 2016). While Kandiyoti emphasizes individual negotiation, this research reveals the collective form of bargaining through the organized *boru* network. The "resistance through compliance" strategy found in 65% of the cases illustrates the complexity of women's agency within a rigid patriarchal system. Interview data reveal how *Boru ni Raja* leverage their cultural position to negotiate broader spaces for women.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* helps explain the incremental change in gender role values (Silva & Bartolozzi Ferreira, 2023). The increase in the average age of marriage for women (from 18.5 to 22.3 years) and the 65% participation rate in education reflect a shift in the cognitive structure of society, which no longer views women solely as wives and mothers. Interestingly, this change has occurred through the adaptation of traditional values, rather than their rejection, demonstrating the cultural system's capacity to respond to social change.

Connell's examination of hegemonic masculinity aids in comprehending the resistance of 60% of male customary elites (Connell, 2016). This resistance is not only economic (maintaining control over resources) but also cultural (preserving the authority to interpret tradition). The findings show that hegemony is upheld through subtle mechanisms such as negative labeling ("harbingers of disaster") and symbolic marginalization. However, *Boru ni Raja* developed effective strategies to confront this resistance through cross-generational alliances.

Putnam's theory of social capital gains a new dimension in the context of this study (Thomas & Gupta, 2021). The network of *Boru ni Raja* demonstrates unique characteristics: it is both horizontal (among women) and vertical (cross-generational), and is capable of bridging the traditional and modern worlds. The effectiveness of this network (success in 65% of cases) challenges the common assumption about the limitations of social capital in traditional societies. The data reveals how this network effectively bridges the traditional and modern realms.

The synthesis of Giddens and Weber in our analysis reveals an important theoretical insight: structural transformation in traditional societies occurs not through revolutionary breaks but through what we term "embedded agency", the strategic mobilization of cultural resources within existing frameworks. This perspective bridges Giddens' emphasis on structural reproduction/transformation with Weber's focus on meaningful social action, offering a more nuanced understanding of social change in patriarchal contexts.

Ultimately, these theoretical advances, combined with our findings about cultural capital conversion (Bourdieu), patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti), and social capital (Putnam), coalesce into a new model of "incremental cultural change" that reconciles several longstanding sociological tensions. This model demonstrates how the *Boru ni Raja's* strategic agency, simultaneously constrained by and transformative of patriarchal structures, creates possibilities for gender inclusive development while maintaining cultural continuity, offering valuable insights for both sociological theory and development praxis.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that *Boru ni Raja* plays a catalytic role in social transformation through sophisticated cultural strategies in the patriarchal Batak Toba society. Empirical evidence demonstrates that they do not merely adapt to the existing system, but actively reconfigure the social structure by leveraging cultural capital as a transformative resource. Mastery of the kinship system and customary rituals enables them to create new spaces for female participation while simultaneously maintaining social cohesion within the community.

This transformative process occurs through mechanisms of creative adaptation that are incremental, rather than revolutionary. *Boru ni Raja* successfully modified core social practices such as the economic profit-sharing system and marriage rituals, which, in turn, fundamentally altered gender relations. Interestingly, these changes gained legitimacy when framed within the context of traditional values, highlighting the complexity of social change dynamics in tightly structured societies.

The findings of this research illustrate that inclusive development in traditional societies requires a deep understanding of the living cultural logic. *Boru ni Raja's* success in driving change demonstrates the potential of cultural actors as bridges between traditional values and modernity. This process not only changes the position of women in the social structure but also revitalizes the cultural system itself through the reinterpretation of foundational values.

The most substantial implication of this finding is the recognition of a model of social change rooted in local cultural power. Unlike conventional development approaches that often assume a conflict between tradition and modernity, the case of *Boru ni Raja* shows that sustainable social transformation can indeed emerge from within the cultural system itself. This opens new possibilities for designing empowerment strategies that are more sensitive to cultural contexts while also respecting the agency of local actors in the process of social change.

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