



Gender Bias in Indonesian Spousal Terms: Insights from an Online Survey

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated gender bias in Indonesian spousal terms through an online survey of 243 participants (141 women, 102 men). The survey focused on three contexts: introducing spouses in public, addressing each other at home, and preferred spousal terms. Results showed that in public settings, women predominantly used *suami* (husband) and men used *istri* (wife), reflecting evolving attitudes toward gender equality. In private settings, however, significant differences emerged. Younger participants frequently used *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname), whereas older generations relied more on kinship terms such as *ayah* (father) and *ibu* (mother). Education also played a role, with those holding higher degrees favoring endearment terms more than those with only high school education, indicating a growing awareness of gender equality among educated groups. Notably, Indonesian spousal terms present specific features. For instance, *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname) exclusively used between spouses, signifies progress toward gender equality within the couple's relationship. Nevertheless, kinship terms such as *bapak* (father) and *mas/akang* (big brother) for husbands highlight traditional family hierarchies, reinforcing male authority and suggesting women's subordinate roles. These patterns reveal that while spousal terms in Indonesia continue to reflect patriarchal norms, societal shifts toward gender equality are underway. Further research is needed to elucidate the underlying reasons for gender bias hidden in spousal terms across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: gender bias, spousal terms, married couples, social values, Indonesian.

INTRODUCTION

A quarter of a century has passed since the beginning of the 21st century, and gender equality has become a universal value in the modern world. Compared to the old days when patriarchy was widespread, it has become easier for women to play active roles in society. However, the gender gap remains large in Indonesia, a Southeast Asian country. According to the recent Global Gender Gap Index, Indonesia ranked 100th out of 146 countries, highlighting persistent gender inequalities (World Economic Forum, 2024).

As the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia has a strong Islamic faith that is deeply embedded in its cultural, social, and political fabric, and deeply influences perceptions of gender roles. Around 87% of the country's 280 million people identify as Muslim and religious principles shape social structures that frame gender expectations. Islam in Indonesia is diverse and intertwined with local traditions, yet common interpretations emphasize family structure, assigning men as leaders and breadwinners and women as caregivers and homemakers. These

gender roles align with traditional Indonesian values and are institutionalized through laws such as the 1974 Marriage Law, which formalized men's roles as heads of families.

Religious practices also shape attire and behavior, with the hijab becoming a symbol of modesty and piety, reinforcing women's moral roles expected by Indonesian traditional society. However, gender roles vary widely across regions and socioeconomic groups. Urbanization and global influences have spurred awareness of gender equality, with many women pursuing education and careers while maintaining religious identities. Conversely, conservative interpretations of Islam in certain areas reinforce patriarchal norms, limiting women's autonomy and emphasizing traditional gender roles.

Despite these challenges, progress is evident. Women increasingly participate in leadership, politics, and religious organizations. Figures such as in 2001 the first female President Megawati Sukarnoputri was elected and the percentage of women in parliament reached 21.57% in 2024, symbolizing that Indonesia is breaking away from its male-dominated tradition and overcoming the gender discrimination stigma in the Muslim world. Muslim women's organizations advocate for rights within Islamic frameworks, showing that Islam can support gender equity.

Indonesia's gender dynamics reflect a complex interplay between religious principles, cultural traditions, and modernization. While conservative norms persist, movements for women's empowerment challenge traditional roles, creating a dynamic landscape for gender equality in this Muslim-majority society.

Although society is shifting toward acceptance of more independent women, obsolete traditional patriarchal values remain deeply rooted in Indonesia, women tend to be seen as weak and dependent on men, in particular, married women have tended to be viewed as lower in social status. Once they are married, there is a strong tendency for women to quit their jobs and take care of their spouses. Moreover, in the case of child marriage, they are forced to discontinue their formal education, creating an educational gap; after marriage, they are deprived of the opportunity to work by staying at home, managing domestic duties, shouldering the burden of housework and childcare, placing themselves in a lower position both inside and outside of the house.

Indonesian traditional values and religious interpretations often reinforce male dominance, with wives expected to obey their husbands, preserve their dignity, and serve them faithfully within the family units. This dynamic reflects a cultural norm in which women are perceived as dependent on their husbands. Achieving gender equality requires confronting these deeply embedded societal disparities. The family serves as a microcosm of society, establishing gender equality within the family is essential for catalyzing broader societal change. Consequently, how individuals refer to their spouses transcends mere linguistic concerns and becomes a critical social issue in addressing gender inequality.

This study aims to investigate how Indonesian couples employ different spousal terms concerning their age and educational background from a gender perspective. Furthermore, it examines the sociolinguistic implications of these practices within contemporary Indonesian society. Through an analysis of how spousal terms reflect and shape gender dynamics, this

study aims to highlight the role of language in the construction and perpetuation of gender roles in Indonesia today.

Gender Bias in Indonesian Society

Language and gender study is an important topic in sociolinguistics. Language, a vital lens for understanding societal values, can reveal how men and women are valued in society (Tanaka and Tanaka, 1996). Gender bias in a language is closely related to the status and roles of men and women in the society where the language is used. Therefore, it is essential to have an overview of gender bias in Indonesian society.

In traditional Indonesian society, women had a relatively high economic status due to labor demands (Nakatani, 2003, 2007; Reid, 1988, 2015; Tamura, 2018, 2023). However, women's political and social status remained lower because men dominated politics and religion in traditional society (Geertz, 1961). Furthermore, women's education was devalued, and practices such as child marriage, bigamy, and unilateral divorce from men perpetuated this gender inequality.

The first school for women was established in 1904 during the Dutch colonial period. Although some urban elite women received a certain level of education and entered professional occupations, women's overall status did not improve because the European gender ideology introduced to Indonesia at that time emphasized the moral norms that women should be chaste and obedient to their fathers and husbands. The brief life of Kartini [1879–1904], a pioneer of women's liberation in Indonesia, exemplifies these constraints: women were forced into early marriage by arrangement with their fathers, were obliged to obey their husbands after marriage, and even after receiving an education, remained subordinate to patriarchal authority (Blackburn, 2004; Tamura, 2018, 2023).

Post-independence, the 1945 Constitution declared gender equality, but societal practices lagged. The gender stereotype of young unmarried women as “submissive and convenient” led to severe discrimination against men in wages and promotions, and women themselves also accepted to work for lower wages and discriminatory treatment because of the inherent patriarchal norm of “for the family, for the brothers”.

Gender equality in the marriage system became a significant concern with the enactment of the 1974 Marriage Act. While the Act established monogamy as the official norm, it permitted polygamy under specific, limited conditions. At the same time, it reinforced traditional gender roles within the family. Article 31, paragraph 3 explicitly states: “*Suami adalah kepala keluarga dan isteri ibu rumah tangga*” (The husband is the head of the family, and the wife is the mother of the household). This gender division is further elaborated in Article 34. Paragraph 1 stipulates: “*Suami wajib melindungi isterinya dan memberikan segala sesuatu keperluan hidup berumah tangga sesuai dengan kemampuannya*” (The husband is obligated to protect his wife and provide for all the necessities of family life to the best of his ability). Meanwhile, paragraph 2 assigns women domestic responsibilities, stating: “*Isteri wajib mengatur urusan rumah-tangga sebaik-baiknya*” (The wife is obligated to manage household affairs to the best of her ability). These provisions highlight a legal framework that institutionalizes gender-based roles, placing women primarily in the domestic sphere and reflecting underlying gender inequality.

Furthermore, Indonesia's women's policy such as the "*Panca Dharma Wanita*" (Five Duties of Women) emphasized women's domestic roles as wives and mothers, embedding gender norms into the legal and cultural fabric (Natatani, 2003; Ohgata, 2004; Tamura, 2018). The details of "*Panca Dharma Wanita*" (Five Duties of Women) are as follows, which are still posted on bulletin boards in numerous local government offices and villages in Indonesia today: (1). *Wanita Sebagai Istri Pendamping Suami* (Women as Wives Companions to Husbands); (2). *Wanita Sebagai Ibu Rumah Tangga* (Women as Housewives); (3). *Wanita Sebagai Penerus Keturunan Dan Pendidik Anak* (Women as Successors of Descendants and Educators of Children); (4). *Wanita Sebagai Pencari Nafkah Tambahan* (Women as Additional Income Seekers); (5). *Wanita Sebagai Warga Negara dan Anggota Masyarakat* (Women as Citizens and Members of Society).

However, the democratization movement of the late 20th century spurred change. Women's NGOs advocated for rights, leading to policy reforms and increased political representation. Renaming the Ministry of Women's Affairs to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection in 2009 signaled a commitment to gender equity. Significant strides include raising the minimum marriage age for women to 19 as the same for men in 2019, and expanding women's political participation: female parliamentary representation rose from 11.82% in 2004 to 21.57% in 2024. Yet, traditional norms persist, limiting social progress. Even as women achieve economic independence, their roles within families often remain constrained by patriarchal expectations.

Language mirrors these social change dynamics. Changes in spousal terms reflect evolving societal values and gender norms. This study aims to explore how these spousal terms vary by age and education, analyzing their sociolinguistic implications. These linguistic patterns can help us better grasp the ongoing challenges and progress toward gender equality in Indonesia.

Gender Bias Reflected in Spousal Terms

Gender bias in societies can be assessed in various ways. As described above, the Global Gender Gap Index and the UNDP Gender Inequality Index are well-known measures. These assessments analyze social statistics, such as the percentages of women in politics, corporate leadership, and academia, and weigh them to produce rankings. Discrepancies between these indexes highlight how different criteria and weightings can yield varying results. For instance, while Japan ranked 118th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024, it was 22nd out of 193 countries in the Gender Inequality Index 2024. Such variations underscore the importance of understanding what aspects each index measures.

Stereotypes and prejudices can be difficult to assess through traditional surveys, as respondents may hide their true attitudes. To overcome this limitation, psychologists have developed methods to measure implicit biases by analyzing reaction times rather than relying on direct responses. One such method, the Implicit Association Test (IAT), has been widely used since its introduction in 1998 (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz, 1998). Charlesworth and Banaji (2022) reviewed the use of explicit and implicit tests, including the IAT, to assess gender stereotypes over a decade (2007-2018). Their analysis of data from 1.4 million gender stereotype tests revealed that both implicit and explicit stereotypes associating men with science/careers and women with arts/family shifted toward neutrality, weakening by 13%-19%. These trends were observed across nearly all demographic groups and geographic

regions in the United States and several other countries, suggesting a global shift in collective gender stereotypes. In Japan, Akita and Mori (2022) used a paper-and-pencil version of the IAT (Mori, Uchida, and Imada, 2008) to study gender stereotypes of sixth graders. They found that boys held less positive implicit views of women compared to their female classmates. However, a gender equity lesson significantly improved these views. Moreover, their follow-up study confirmed the positive effects persisted for over three years (Akita and Mori, 2023).

Nin (2023a, 2023b) adopted a unique approach to examining gender bias by analyzing how couples address each other in social contexts across three East Asian countries. Through online surveys, Nin compared spousal terms in Japan and China. These findings revealed that Japanese spousal terms were more male-centric, despite Japan's reputation for being more Westernized. In a follow-up study, Nin (2024) expanded the research to include South Korea, surveying 235 Koreans (101 women and 134 men). The results showed similarities between Japanese and Korean spousal terms, which stood in contrast to the spousal terms used in China, underscoring varying degrees of gender bias among these East Asian cultures.

Based on Nin (2023a, 2023b, 2004), this study aims to examine spousal terms in Indonesia, a country with a distinct cultural and religious background. Unlike China, Japan, and Korea, which are primarily Confucian countries, Indonesia is a Muslim-majority nation with a mixed historical legacy influenced by Southeast Asian traditions and Dutch colonial rule. By exploring spousal terms in Indonesia, this study aims to identify sociolinguistic features unique to the region and uncover gender bias in Southeast Asia.

Exception of Takadono (1985, 1987), there has been little previous research on Indonesian spousal terms. Takadono (1985) investigated kinship terms in Indonesian and three Indonesian dialects (Acehnese, Batak, and Minangkabau) with a few Indonesian informants. The study found that a husband in his 50s addressed his wife by her short name, while his wife addressed him by kinship terms such as *mas* (big brother) and *bapak* (father). Takadono (1987) also found that an Indonesian male informant in his 30s addressed his wife as *mama* (mom). Takadono (1985,1987) interpreted the above language usage phenomenon as "psychological identification" by quoting Suzuki (1973, 1979). Takadono (1987) also pointed out that Indonesian address terms can function as honorifics, emphasizing that kinship terms are used as honorifics when speaking to non-relatives, which are found in other Asian languages but are not very common in European languages such as English.

While Takadono (1985, 1987) provides valuable insights into Indonesian spousal terms, the studies had a few informants and the research data was from the 1980s, a comprehensive study is needed to evaluate the contemporary use of spousal terms in Indonesia. This study adopts the methodology used in Nin's previous study using an online survey to systematically investigate how gender bias is reflected in spousal terms among Indonesian married couples.

Indonesian Spousal Terms in this Study

This section provides a concise introduction for readers unfamiliar with Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia). The history of the Indonesian language is short, and in 1928 the term "Indonesian" (Bahasa Indonesia) was first officially used in Indonesia. On August 17, 1945, the independence of the Republic of Indonesia was declared, and one language, "Indonesian" (Bahasa Indonesia) became the national language of the Republic of Indonesia as an identity unifying various ethnic

groups. In other words, Indonesian is the official language of Indonesia, uniting a nation with over 700 local languages. However, its roots lie in Malay, which dates back to the 7th century and was historically used as a trade and administrative language throughout Southeast Asia. Over time, Malay was influenced by local languages such as Javanese and Sundanese, Sanskrit, Tamil, Arabic, Dutch, English, Chinese, and Portuguese to form the Indonesian language we know today. The linguistic overview provides essential context for examining how Indonesian spousal terms reflect societal values, particularly gender roles. By understanding these linguistic characteristics, we can better analyze the relationship between language and social norms in Indonesia.

This paper presents Indonesian words in standard orthography, written in italic forms followed by their English translations in brackets. Additionally, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean words in this paper are indicated in standard orthography, followed by their phonetic transcriptions and English translations in brackets. Hence, the main spousal terms and their constructional origins in this paper are listed in Table 1 for readers unfamiliar with the Indonesian language.

Table 1: Indonesian spousal terms in this study.

Indonesian	Phonetic transcription	English translation	Constituent characters and their meanings
suami	su-a-mi	husband	suami = husband
bapak	ba-pak	father	bapak = father
mas	mas	big brother	mas = big brother
akang	a-kang	big brother	akang = big brother
ayah	a-yah	father	ayah = father
papa	pa-pa	dad	papa = dad
papi	pa-pi	daddy	papi = daddy
anak-anak	a-nak a-nak	children	anak = child anak-anak = children
istri	is-tri	wife	istri = wife
ibu	i-bu	mother	ibu = mother
bunda	bun-da	mother	bunda = mother
mama	ma-ma	mom	mama = mom
mami	ma-mi	mommy	mami = mommy
dik	dik	little one	dik = younger brother/sister
nama panggilan	na-ma pang-gi-lan	short name	nama = name panggilan = calling
nama depan	na-ma de-pan	first name	nama = name depan = front
nama belakang	na-ma be-la-kang	last name	nama = name belakang = behind
panggilan sayang	pang-gi-lan sa-yang	dear nickname	panggilan = calling sayang = dear/darling
orang di rumah	o-rang di ru-mah	person at home	orang = person di rumah = at home
keluarga	ke-lu-ar-ga	family	keluarga = family
sayang	sa-yang	dear/darling	sayang = dear/darling
cinta	cin-ta	love	cinta = love
manis	ma-nis	sweet	manis = sweet
beb	beb	baby	beb = baby (short for "baby")

ayang	a-yang	dear/darling	ayang = dear/darling (a cute version of “sayang”)
sayangku	sa-yang-ku	my dear/darling	sayang = dear/darling ku = my

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an online survey using Google Forms, replicating the methodology used by Nin (2023a, 2023b, 2024), to examine spousal terms across different social contexts. Participants were recruited through graduate students at several universities in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, who invited their parents and married couple friends to join the survey. All respondents were married native Indonesian speakers from diverse regions, although regional language differences were not analyzed.

The questionnaire covered three categories, as outlined in Nin's studies on Chinese, Japanese, and Korean spousal terms:

1. **Indirect spousal terms:** How respondents introduce their spouses in public settings (e.g., to bosses, clients, colleagues, or friends).
2. **Direct spousal terms:** How spouses address each other privately at home.
3. **Preferred spousal terms:** The terms respondents prefer their spouses to use when addressing them in public and private.

The survey was conducted anonymously, collecting only basic demographic information (gender, age, and education) in line with Nin's methodology. This ensured respondent confidentiality while allowing for meaningful analysis of linguistic patterns related to gender roles in Indonesian society.

RESULTS

A total of 243 valid responses were collected from participants (141 women and 102 men) between April and October 2024. The age distribution was as follows: among women, 12.8% were aged 20-29, 27.7% were 30-39, 36.2% were 40-49, and 23.4% were over 50. Among men, 28.6% were aged 20-29, 30.0% were 30-39, 32.1% were 40-49, and 9.3% were over 50.

Respondents' educational backgrounds showed the following trends: among women, 28.7% had completed high school, 48.9% held a college degree, and 20.2% had a master's or doctoral degree. Among men, 40.7% had a high school education, 47.9% held a college degree, and 9.3% had a master's or doctoral degree.

The results are presented in three categories: indirect spousal terms, direct spousal terms, and preferred spousal terms. For each category, analyses were conducted separately for female and male respondents. In addition, variations in term usage patterns based on age and educational background were examined.

Indirect Spousal Terms

In Indonesian, the terms *suami* (husband) and *istri* (wife) are commonly used to refer to spouses. However, when introducing their spouse to others, Indonesians also use other expressions, including kinship terms, first names, or short names. In addition, Indonesian names are long, so they often have short names as nicknames.

Figure 1 illustrates how individuals introduce their spouses in public settings, such as to bosses, business clients, colleagues, or close friends.

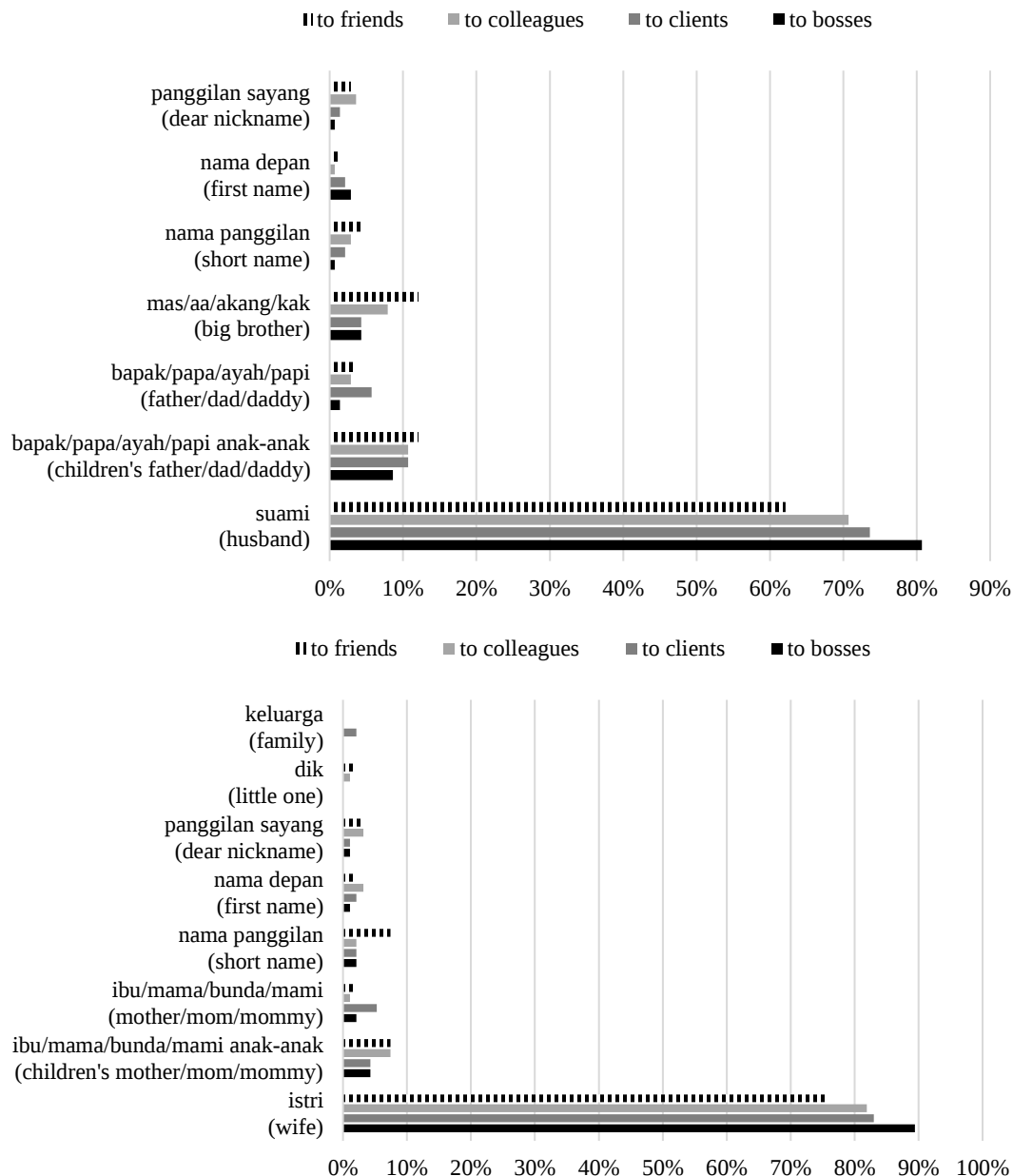


Figure 1: How to introduce their spouses to others in public: women's (top) and men's (bottom).

The results show that most women use *suami* (husband), and most men use *istri* (wife), particularly when introducing their spouses to a boss (80.3% of women and 89.4% of men). This reflects a shift in language use driven by increasing gender equality awareness in Indonesian society.

Nonetheless, two notable trends in the use of kinship terms persist. First, approximately 10% of women refer to their spouse as *bapak/papa/ayah/papi anak-anak* (the children's

father/dad), while fewer than 8% of men use *ibu/mama/bunda/mami anak-anak* (the children's mother/mom). Second, 12.1% of women use kinship terms like *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) when introducing their husbands to friends.

It is important to note that terms such as *bapak/ayah* (father), *ibu/bunda* (mother) are kinship terms but are sometimes used for spouses. Similarly, loanwords like *papa/papi* (dad), and *mama/mami* (mom), have become more common among urban couples. In addition, kinship terms such as *mas/akang* means "big brother" but are sometimes used for husbands. Although using these kinship terms to introduce spouses in public has significantly decreased, some couples still retain the practice.

Overall, this decline suggests that modern Indonesian couples are increasingly uncomfortable using kinship terms for their spouses in public. Referring to one another as *suami* (husband) and *istri* (wife) is now considered the norm, reflecting changing attitudes toward gender equality and affirming that societal perceptions of gender roles are evolving.

Direct Spousal Terms

Figure 2 illustrates how couples address each other directly at home, revealing a different trend compared to public situations discussed earlier. The data shows that the most commonly used term among women was *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname), used by 42.9%, followed by *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (father/dad) at 30.7%, and *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) at 15.7%. For men, the most frequently used term was *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom), used by 38.3%, with *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname) at 31.9% and *dik* (little one) at 11.7%. This indicates an asymmetry in how men and women perceive and address each other within marital relationships at home.

First, regarding *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname), 42.9% of women used this term compared to 31.9% of men, an 11% difference. This suggests that women are more inclined to use affectionate nicknames for their spouses.

Second, for kinship terms, 38.3% of men referred to their spouses as *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom) while 30.7% of women used *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (father/dad). This indicates a stronger tendency among men to use kinship terms for their spouses than women.

Third, 15.7% of women addressed their spouses as *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother), while 11.7% of men used *dik* (little one) for their spouses. Notably, *dik* is short for *adik* meaning "younger person", gender-neutral, referring to either a younger brother or sister. Similarly, *kak* is short for *kakak* meaning "older person", gender-neutral. Although the usage of these terms is low overall, it is slightly higher than in public settings. Importantly, terms such as *mas/akang* (big brother) and *dik* (little one) reflect an unequal, hierarchical relationship between spouses rather than an equal partnership, highlighting a distinct gender bias in the Indonesian language.

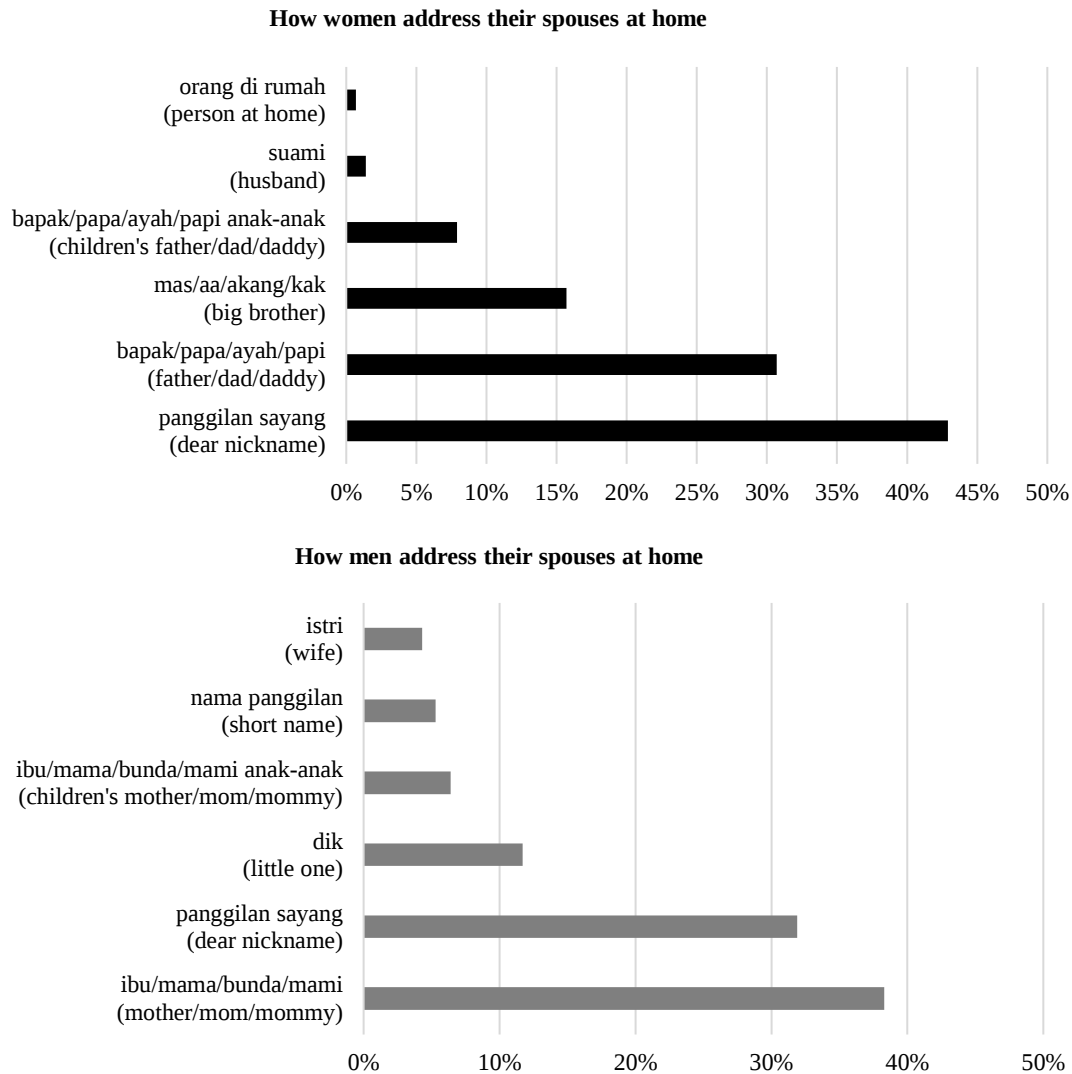


Figure 2: How couples directly address each other at home: women's (top) and men's (bottom).

How do these asymmetries in spousal terms correlate with respondents' age and educational background? Figures 3 and 4 present the analysis results.

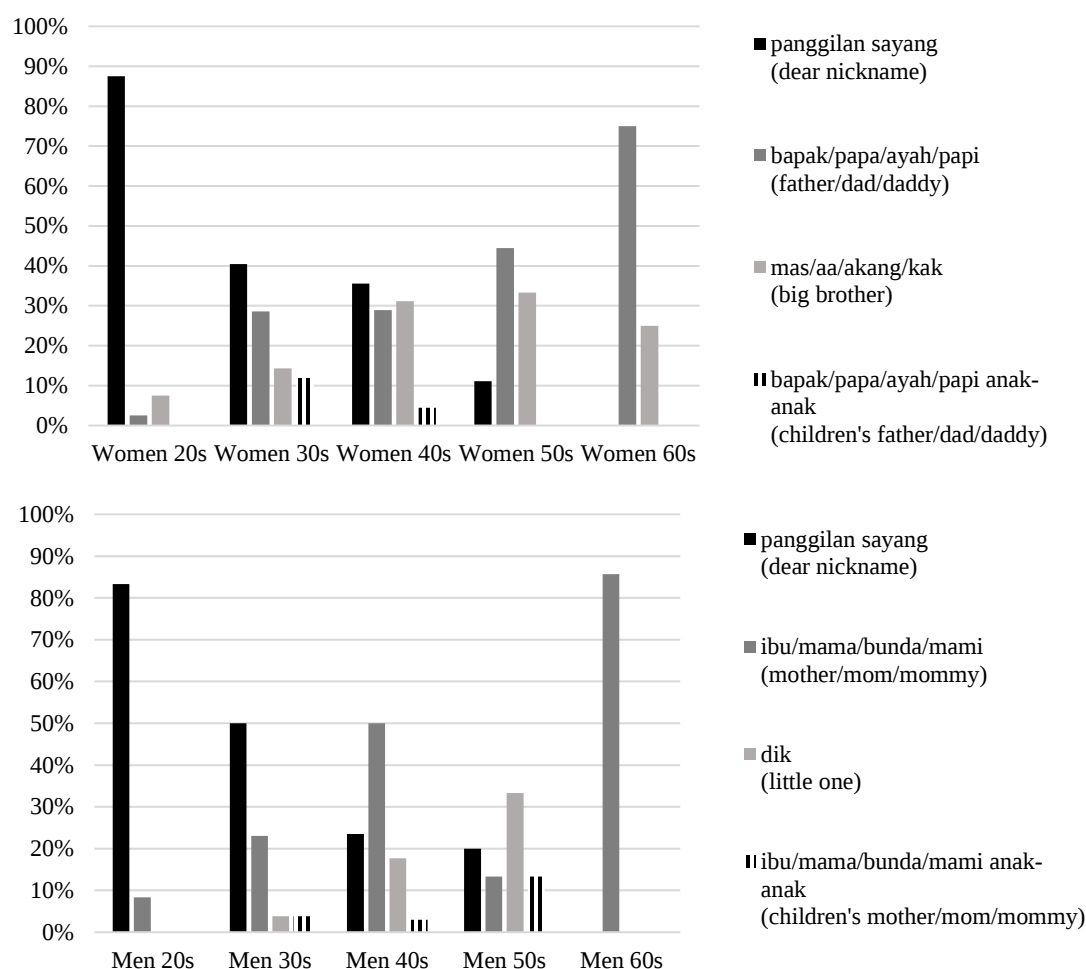


Figure 3: Analysis based on age group: women's (top) and men's (bottom)

Figure 3 shows that younger generations, especially those in their 20s and 30s, predominantly use *panggilan sayang* (dear nicknames), while older generations tend to rely on traditional kinship terms such as *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (father/dad) and *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom). Notably, individuals in their 20s use terms of endearment at twice the rate of other age groups, whereas those in their 60s do not use such terms at all. This highlights clear generational differences in spousal term usage.

Additionally, women in their 40s, 50s, and 60s frequently use *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) to address their husbands, while men in their 40s and 50s often use *dik* (little one) to address their wives. These findings suggest that age plays a significant role in the choice of spousal terms.

Figure 4 reveals that higher-educated individuals, both women and men, are more likely to use *panggilan sayang* (dear nicknames), while those with lower levels of education tend to rely on traditional kinship terms such as *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (father/dad) and *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom). This suggests that educational attainment is a significant factor influencing the choice of spousal terms.

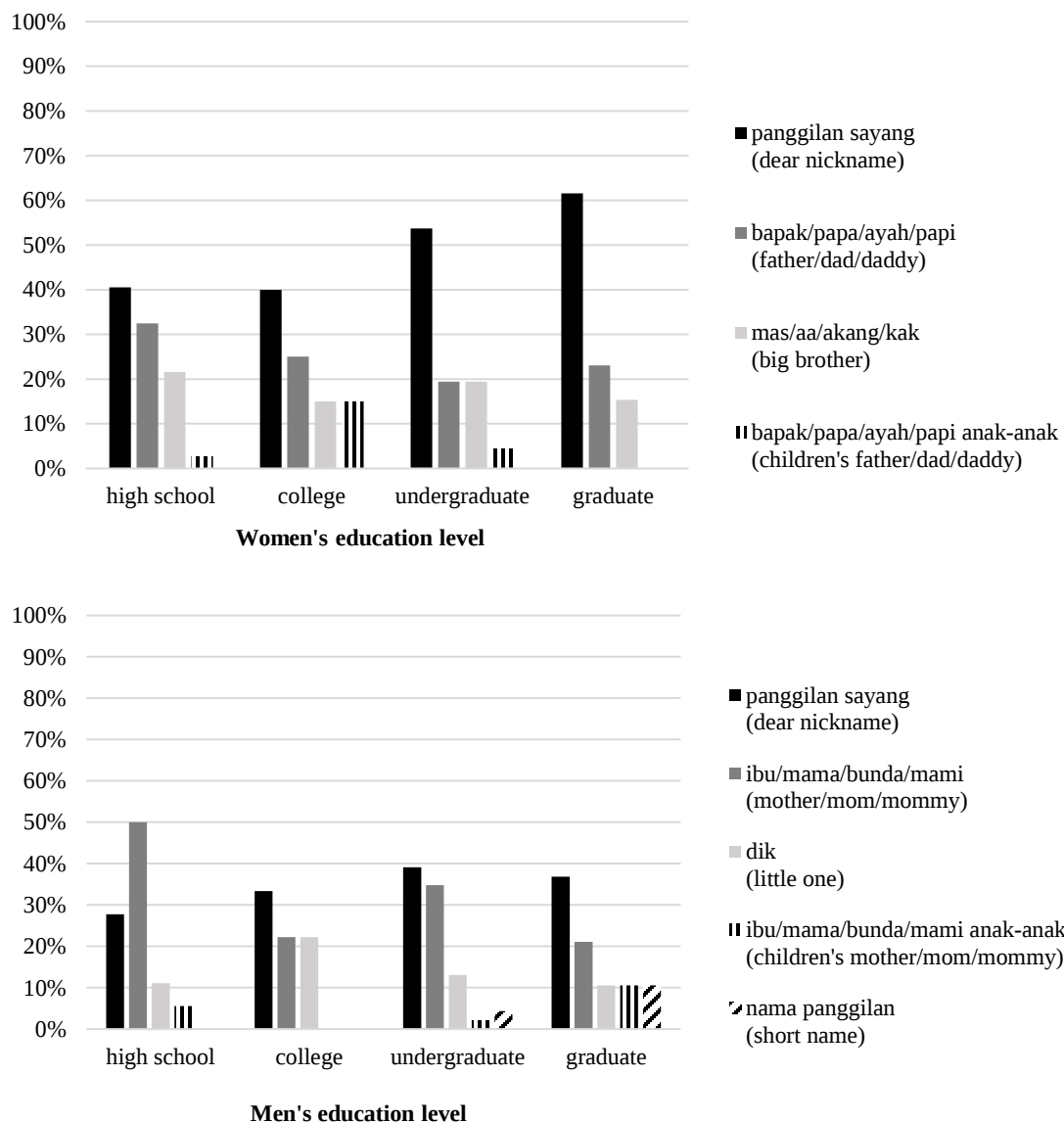


Figure 4: Analysis based on education group: women's (top) and men's (bottom)

Moreover, this trend is particularly pronounced among women. Women with higher educational levels are more inclined to use *panggilan sayang* (dear nicknames) to address their spouses, hinting at a shift in gender attitudes facilitated by increased educational opportunities for women. In contrast, the use of *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) by women and *dik* (little one) by men shows no relation to educational background. This reaffirms the unique cultural characteristics of these spousal terms in the Indonesian social context.

Preferred Spousal Terms Publicly and Privately

In the final section, the results regarding the preferred spousal terms used by Indonesian couples in both public and private settings are presented. As shown in Figure 5, the most preferred term among women was *istri* (wife), at 81.9%, while the majority of men preferred the term *suami* (husband), at 71.4%. Notably, there is little difference between the preferred terms and their actual usage. This indicates that both women and men generally prefer not to

be referred to by kinship terms, reflecting a recent shift in gender equality awareness within Indonesian society.

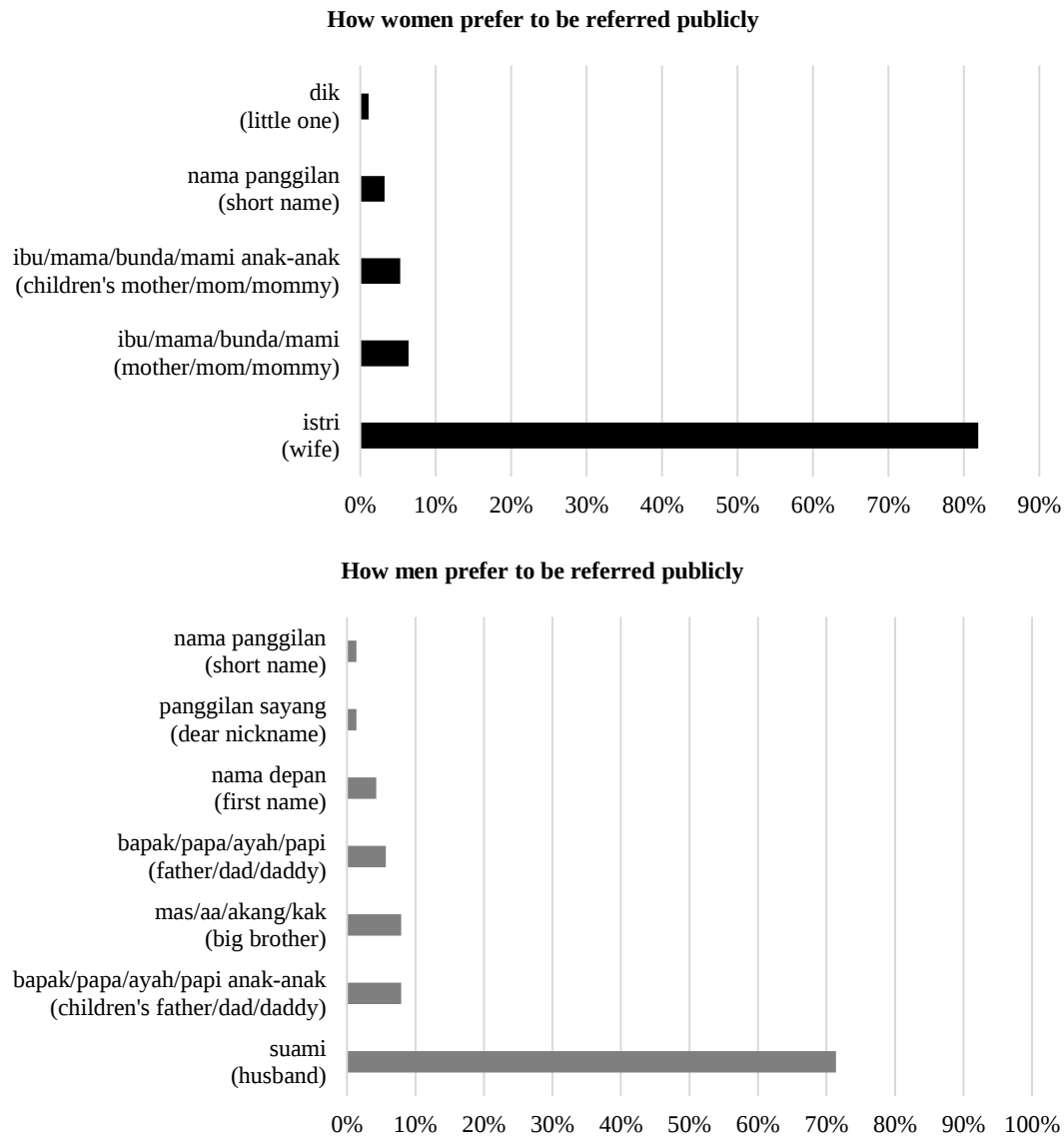


Figure 5: How couples prefer to be referred to publicly: women's (top) and men's (bottom)

However, in private settings, as shown in Figure 6, the ranking of women's preferred terms was as follows: *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname) (36.2%), *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom/mommy) (34.0%), and *dik* (little one) (12.8%). For men, the preferred terms ranked as: *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname) (49.3%), *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (father/dad/daddy) (23.6%), and *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) (19.3%).

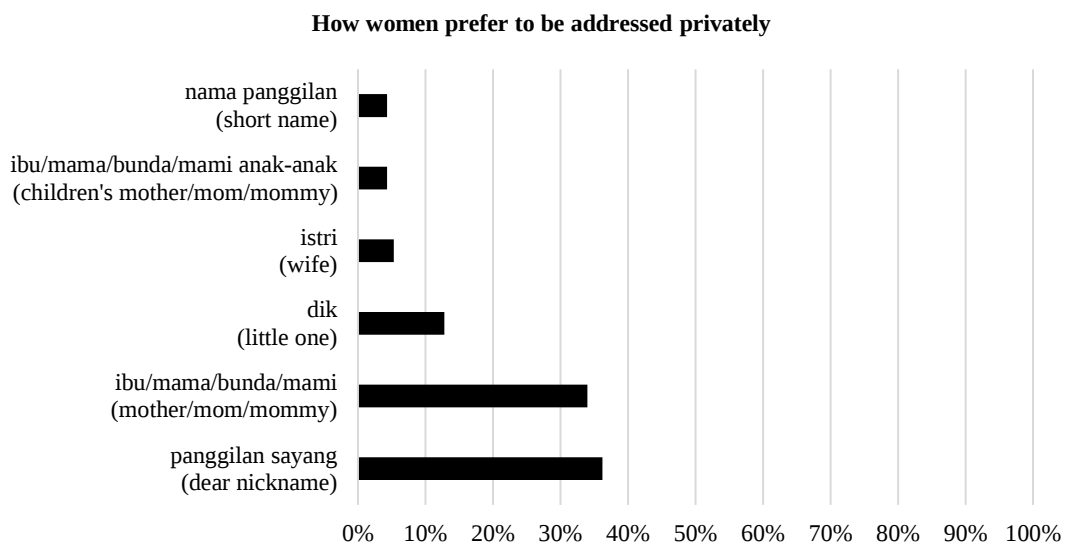
Although the preferred terms differ from actual usage, it is evident that both women and men favor the endearment *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname). However, the results reveal that women's preferences for *panggilan sayang* (36.2%) and *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (34.0%) are almost equally distributed. This indicates that women's preferences oscillate between the

affectionate term and *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom) at home, reflecting their dual roles. Women are often compelled to navigate the conflicting expectations of being both a wife and a mother.

On the other hand, nearly half of men prefer *panggilan sayang* (49.3%). However, it is noteworthy that the second-ranked *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (23.6%) and third-ranked *mas/aa/akang/kak* (19.3%) are relatively close in percentage. This suggests that while many men prefer being addressed with affectionate terms, a significant portion still prefers to be addressed as a “father” or a “big brother” at home.

It is important to note that it is common for wives to address their husbands as *bapak* or *mas* in Indonesia which is related to cultural norms and linguistic traditions. *Bapak* is a formal term that literally means “father”, but is often used to show respect. It is similar to the English “Sir” or “Mister” but has a deeper meaning of respect for someone older or of higher status, even in a marital relationship. It also implies authority or responsibility. Similarly, *mas* roughly translates to “big brother” used for a husband or an older male figure in the family or community, showing respect.

Overall, the differences between women and men in how they prefer to be addressed by their spouses in private settings highlight a clear asymmetrical perception of gender roles in the household.



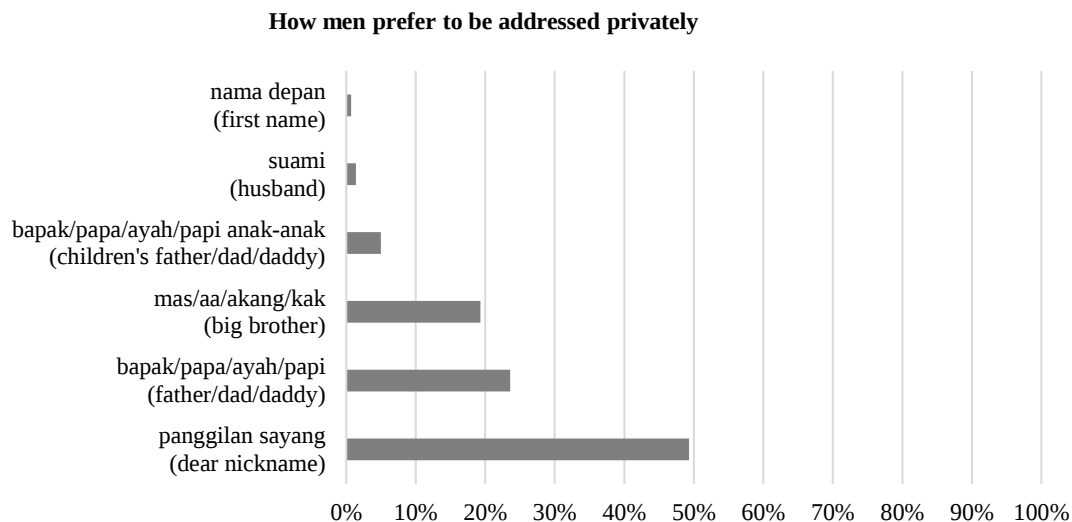


Figure 6: How couples prefer to be addressed privately: women's (top) and men's (bottom)

DISCUSSION

Public and Private Differences in the Use of Spousal Terms

This study identified clear differences between public and private settings in the use of spousal terms. When introducing their spouse in public, women most frequently used *suami* (husband), while men predominantly used *istri* (wife). This reflects a recent shift in language use driven by evolving attitudes and increasing awareness of gender equality in Indonesian society. Referring to spouses by kinship terms in public has significantly decreased, although a small percentage of couples still use them when introducing their spouse to colleagues or friends (women: 10%; men: 7.4%). Overall, modern couples seem reluctant or uncomfortable with using or being addressed by kinship terms in public and increasingly view terms such as *suami* (husband) and *istri* (wife) as the norm. This trend reaffirms that gender awareness in public contexts is changing over time.

In private settings, however, an asymmetry in perception between men and women regarding marital relationships becomes evident. Women are more likely than men to use terms of endearment when addressing their spouses directly, while men show a greater tendency to use kinship terms. Furthermore, this asymmetry correlates with age and education level. Younger generations more frequently use *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname), whereas middle-aged and older generations prefer kinship terms like *bapak /ayah* (father) and *ibu/bunda* (mother). Additionally, individuals with higher educational backgrounds tend to use endearment terms more than those with only high school educations, reflecting a growing awareness of gender equality influenced by educational advancement.

These findings suggest that spousal terms strongly reflect societal and cultural dynamics, yet they continue to evolve with time and context. Factors such as age and educational background play a crucial role in shaping the choice of spousal terms.

Unique Sociolinguistic Features of Indonesian Spousal Terms

A notable unique sociolinguistic feature is the spousal term *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname), used by Indonesian married couples when alone at home as an endearing expression similar to

“honey/darling/dear” in English. In this survey, 42.9% of women and 31.9% of men used it, indicating a higher tendency for women to use endearing expressions than men.

It is important to point out that *panggilan sayang* is an Indonesian term that translates to “endearing nickname” or “dear nickname” in English. It refers to terms or nicknames that Indonesians use to express affection or love toward someone, typically a romantic partner, but also for close friends or family members. These terms are often used to show warmth, intimacy, or affection. For example, in Indonesian, common *panggilan sayang* might include: *sayang* (honey/darling/dear), *cinta* (love), *manis* (sweet), *beb* (short for baby), *ayang* (a cute version of *sayang*), and *sayangku* (my dear), used between partners to show closeness and affection.

This linguistic phenomenon reflects an emerging gender-equal relationship dynamic between Indonesian couples. It is rarely found in Japanese but is found in Chinese and Korean. The word *sayang* (honey/darling/dear) is similar to the Chinese spousal term “亲爱的 qīn'àide” (honey/darling/dear) used between couples alone at home (Nin, 2023a). Similarly, in Korean there is the spousal term “여보 yeo-bo” (darling) used only by Korean married couples when alone at home as an endearing expression similar to “honey/darling/dear” in English (Nin, 2024).

Notably, this highlights the unique sociolinguistic features of the Indonesian spousal terms, which are similar to the gender-equal spousal terms found in East Asia such as China and Korea, indicating the same evolution of gender equality, despite the different cultural and religious beliefs.

Gender Bias Specific to the Indonesian Spousal Terms

This study also revealed a unique gender bias in Indonesian spousal terms, wherein women address their husbands as *bapak* (father) and *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother), while men address their wives as *dik* (little one).

The kinship terms *bapak* (father), *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother), and *dik* (little one) originally denote genealogical relationships within families (Agha, 2007; Braun, 1988; Tanaka and Tanaka, 1996). However, their usage between spouses deviates from their literal meanings. Wives use *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) not to signify biological older siblings but as a respectful term for their husbands. Similarly, husbands use *dik* (little one) for their wives, unrelated to its traditional meaning for biological younger siblings. While age differences between spouses may play a minor role, this practice primarily reflects the male-dominated patriarchal family system that persists today.

According to Takadono (1987), Indonesian linguistic norms prescribe specific ways of addressing individuals based on status differences between speaker and listener. Older individuals are accorded higher status than younger ones, and those in lower social positions are expected to show respect toward those in higher positions. For instance, *bapak* (father) and *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) are traditionally used to address men of higher status with respect, while *dik* (little one) is a gender-neutral term used for those of lower status.

In marriage, the use of *bapak* (father) and *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) signifies the husband's higher and more authoritative position as the head of the family. Conversely, *dik* (little one) reflects the wife's subordinate position, reinforcing an unequal and hierarchical relationship. The spousal terms *bapak* (father), *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother), and *dik* (little one) thus exemplify a gender-biased, asymmetrical dynamic specific to the Indonesian language.

Although only 12.7% of women use *mas/aa/akang/kak* (big brother) to address their husbands in public, 15.7% of women continue to use it in private, particularly when couples are alone at home. This demonstrates that such practices cannot be dismissed as insignificant. While these terms may carry a social connotation of “intimacy” between spouses, they are more accurately indicative of a “difference in authority”. In other words, in the context of the Indonesian language, the husband-wife relationship is framed as one where the husband is superior and the wife is subordinate.

Common Gender Bias in Asian Spousal Terms

When a couple is alone, 38.3% of men addressed their spouses as *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom/mommy), and 30.7% of women addressed their spouses as *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (father/dad/daddy), indicating a slightly higher tendency for men to use kinship terms than women. Despite this small difference, it is evident that more than 30% of Indonesian men and women address their spouses by kinship terms even in the absence of children.

While it may seem unusual to use such terms without children present, addressing one another as *bapak/papa/ayah/papi* (father/dad/daddy) and *ibu/mama/bunda/mami* (mother/mom/mommy) highlights a focus on their roles as “father” and “mother” within the family, rather than as “husband” and “wife” in the marital relationship. This practice, emphasizing familial roles over spousal ones, is not unique to Indonesia but is also observed in other Asian languages such as Japanese, Korean, and Chinese (Chen, 1999; Fischer, 1964; Suzuki, 1973; Nin, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). For instance, Japanese couples use “お父さん o-to-san” (father) or “パパ papa” (dad) for husbands and “お母さん o-ka-san” (mother) or “ママ mama” (mom) for wives when alone (Nin, 2023b). Similarly, Korean couples use “아빠 a-ppa” (dad) and “엄마 eom-ma” (mom) (Nin, 2024). In Chinese, this practice is somewhat limited, with those of lower educational levels commonly using terms like “孩子他爸 háizi tā bà” (the child's father) and “孩子他妈 háizi tā mā” (the child's mother) to address their spouse (Chen, 1999; Nin, 2023a).

Previous studies have described this linguistic phenomenon as stemming from a “child-centered viewpoint” (Fischer, 1964) or “empathic identification” (Suzuki, 1973). However, little research has examined it from a gender perspective. Addressing each other with kinship terms implicitly divides family roles and responsibilities, often reinforcing traditional gender expectations. Men, in particular, appear to perceive their wives as “motherly figures” expecting them to perform caregiving roles such as “looking after the children” and “managing household chores”. In many traditional Asian households, the wife is seen as the family's primary caretaker and primary bearer of household chores, and this gender role is central to the wife's identity

within the family unit. Using “mother” is a way to emphasize this important gender role aspect of the wife's identity. However, this reduces women to the symbolic image of the domestic “mother” overlooking their individuality and autonomy.

This linguistic phenomenon, evident across several Asian languages, reveals a deeply rooted gender bias in spousal terms. Vocabulary reflects societal and cultural conventions, and in traditional male-dominated Asian societies, men have historically held power, while women have become subordinate. This hierarchical structure is reflected in spousal terms, perpetuating traditional values and gender roles within families.

CONCLUSIONS

The terms spouses use to address each other vary depending on the customs of a country or region and are fluid, evolving in line with changing times and values. This research investigated gender bias in Indonesian spousal terms through an online survey conducted among 243 Indonesians (141 women, 102 men). It explored how Indonesian couples use different spousal terms depending on their age and educational background, offering a gender perspective and discussing sociolinguistic implications in contemporary Indonesian society.

The study examined patterns of spousal terms in three specific contexts: when introducing spouses in public, when couples are alone at home, and the preferred terms publicly and privately. Results showed that in public, most women tended to use *suami* (husband), and most men used *istri* (wife), reflecting recent shifts in language usage driven by changing attitudes and growing awareness of gender equality. However, in private, notable asymmetries were observed. Younger generations favored *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname), while middle-aged and older generations often used kinship terms such as *bapak/ayah* (father) and *ibu/bunda* (mother). Respondents with higher educational backgrounds were more likely to use endearment terms, suggesting a link between education and growing gender awareness. Notably, Indonesian spousal terms present specific features. For instance, *panggilan sayang* (dear nickname) exclusively used between spouses signifies progress toward gender equality within the couple's relationship. However, kinship terms like *bapak* (father) and *mas/akang* (big brother) used for spouses imply a hierarchical dynamic, with husbands occupying a higher, more authoritative role as family heads, reflecting the wives' subordinate status. This linguistic practice underscores gender bias in the Indonesian language. Similar findings are reported among middle and lower-class Malay wives who address their husbands as *abang* (big brother) (Nor, 2019).

The study highlighted limitations, including the use of online surveys, which may not fully represent the general population, especially individuals without internet access. Although widespread smartphone use may mitigate this issue, caution is necessary when interpreting the results. Additionally, the sample was primarily composed of university students' parents, mostly from higher-educated backgrounds. Future research should aim for a more diverse sample, encompassing a broader range of ages and social strata. Some may argue that kinship terms used as spousal terms are merely symbolic and devoid of their original meaning. However, their continued use often unconsciously perpetuates hierarchical and dependent relationships, reinforcing traditional male-dominated values. To eliminate discrimination from language, it is crucial to recognize that language is not merely a neutral communication tool but a medium that can reflect and reinforce discriminatory ideas.

While significant progress has been made toward gender equality, challenges remain. One reason the gender gap persists is a lack of awareness among Southeast Asians. Despite its severity, few recognize Indonesia as a country with a significant gender gap. Addressing this requires acknowledging Southeast Asia's historically obscured social structures, questioning traditional beliefs and values, and implementing concrete measures to close the gap. Language and gender studies continue to offer critical insights into such social issues.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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