E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX
VIDYANTARA
Jurnal Humaniora dan Ilmu Sosial
https://lenterajournals.com/index.php/VJHIS

Gender Bias in Corruption: An Analysis of Ambivalent Sexism in Cases 2017–2024

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Abstract

Corruption is a global problem that negatively impacts the economic, political, and social systems. Corruption cases occurring between 2017 and 2024 demonstrate inequalities in the legal system, including the application of laws to perpetrators. This study will examine gender bias in the handling of corruption cases using the Ambivalent Sexism theory. The cases of Surya Darmadi and Rita Widyasari demonstrate the practice of gender-based legal discrimination. A descriptive qualitative approach was applied in this study, using an online questionnaire distributed to 115 respondents as a data collection instrument. The data were then linked to the Ambivalent Sexism theory to uncover public perceptions. The results indicate that the majority of respondents acknowledged that gender bias is still evident in the legal process in Indonesia, especially in corruption cases. Furthermore, the public tends to view legal cases differently due to media framing that is not gender-neutral. This study confirms that gender bias significantly influences the handling of corruption cases, necessitating improvements in legal policy to create more equitable treatment based on gender.

Kata kunci: gender bias, corruption, ambivalent sexism

Abstrak

Korupsi merupakan permasalahan global yang mempunyai dampak negatif terhadap sistem ekonomi, politik, dan sosial. Kasus korupsi yang terjadi pada periode 2017-2024 menunjukkan adanya ketimpangan dalam sistem hukum, termasuk dalam penerapan hukum yang diberikan kepada pelaku. Studi ini akan mengulas bias gender dalam penanganan kasus korupsi dengan menggunakan pendekatan teori *Ambivalent Sexism*. Kasus Surya Darmadi dan Rita Widyasari menunjukkan praktik diskriminasi hukum berbasis gender yang nyata. Pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif diterapkan dalam penelitian ini dengan instrumen pengumpulan data berupa kuesioner online yang disebarkan kepada 115 responden, kemudian dihubungkan dengan teori *Ambivalent Sexism* untuk mengungkap persepsi masyarakat. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar responden mengakui bahwa bias gender masih terlihat dalam proses hukum di Indonesia terutama pada kasus korupsi. Selain itu, masyarakat cenderung memandang kasus hukum secara berbeda akibat *framing* media yang tidak netral gender. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa bias gender sangat mempengaruhi penanganan kasus korupsi, sehingga diperlukan perbaikan dalam kebijakan hukum agar tercipta perlakuan yang lebih adil dalam gender.

Kata kunci: bias gender, korupsi, *ambivalent sexism*

Introduction

Corruption is a global issue that undermines the economic, political, and social systems of various countries. Between 2017 and 2024, corruption cases and reported bribery in Indonesia demonstrated a weak legal system and a lack of transparency in law enforcement. Although the Corruption Eradication Commission known as KPK and the Financial and Development Supervisory Agency have worked diligently to eradicate corruption, the results have been less than optimal due to factors such as weak oversight at the regional level and limited public understanding of corruption.

According to the Supreme Court's ruling, cited from the Directory of Supreme Court Decisions of the Republic of Indonesia website, in the Surya Darmadi case, the defendant was found guilty of corruption in a palm oil plantation project, resulting in state losses of Rp39.7 trillion. The Supreme Court sentenced Surya Darmadi to 16 years in prison and a fine of Rp1 billion. For comparison, in the Rita Widyasari corruption case, involving bribery and money laundering totaling Rp436 billion in projects and permits in Kutai Kartanegara, the panel of judges sentenced the defendant to 10 years in prison and a fine of Rp600 million. Rita Widyasari was found guilty of accepting Rp 110.7 billion in gratuities and Rp 6 billion in bribes from parties related to the project.

The comparison of sentences between the Surya Darmadi and Rita Widyasari cases demonstrates an imbalance in legal treatment disproportionate to the magnitude of state losses. Surya Darmadi was sentenced to 16 years in prison for corruption amounting to Rp 39.7 trillion, while Rita Widyasari received a 10-year sentence for losses of Rp 436 billion. This disparity fuels the public perception that female corruptors are stigmatized more than male ones. It's as if corruption by women is considered more blatant and unacceptable, even though the losses incurred by male perpetrators are far greater. This phenomenon reflects gender bias in public perceptions of corruption and demonstrates the need for more in-depth study of the consistency of punishment.

This phenomenon aligns with the theory of ambivalent sexism, which explains differential treatment based on gender stereotypes in the legal system and public perceptions of female corruptors. The theory of ambivalent sexism by Glick and Fiske (1996) distinguishes between benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. This theory highlights how women in politics often face double standards, where social expectations for them differ from those of men. This bias can influence public perception, media coverage, and legal decisions against female corruption offenders.

This study aims to analyze the influence of gender bias in corruption cases through the Ambivalent Sexism theory, specifically in influencing the perception and handling of corruption cases involving women in Indonesia. By examining this discriminatory treatment, this research is expected to provide a new perspective on gender bias in the law and contribute to the formulation of equitable anti-corruption policies.

This research literature review utilizes Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism theory on hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. According to this theory, ambivalent sexism is prejudice against women that arises from male dominance in society and outdated views on women's roles. This prejudice is divided into hostile sexism (open hatred) and benevolent sexism (protection or derogatory praise).

Previous research by Rukman, Musawwir, and Aditya (2023), entitled "A Description of Ambivalent Sexism Tendencies in the Workforce in Makassar City," stated that benevolent sexism is a mechanism for subtly reinforcing masculine power, while hostile sexism blatantly maintains traditional gender hierarchies by degrading women.

Ilyas (2015), in his study "Women and Corruption: Sexism in Online Media Reporting," revealed that women's involvement in corruption is often considered inappropriate, reflected in astonished expressions such as "how can women be corrupt?" According to Ilyas, society tends to associate women with noble character traits such as honesty and moral integrity, thus being seen as guardians of ethical values. However, corruption remains a reprehensible act regardless of gender.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach with a data collection instrument in the form of an online questionnaire based on Google Form. Qualitative methods are exploratory research by describing the formulation of the problem that originates from a phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). This questionnaire was created to understand in-depth public perceptions regarding gender and corruption issues, particularly in cases involving men and women in the period 2017-2024. This study involved respondents aged 18-30 years from the general public, with data collected through Google Form to understand their perceptions regarding gender and corruption issues. The data obtained were analyzed based on the perspective of the Ambivalent Sexism theory, to identify emerging patterns and themes related to public perceptions of gender and corruption issues.

Results and Discussion

Research shows that public perceptions of law and justice are often influenced by their daily experiences and information, validating the need for further analysis of these factors (Smith, 2020). Furthermore, the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods (mixed methods) in this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the issues under study (Creswell, 2014).

Based on the data obtained, the majority of respondents believe that gender bias is a factor influencing Indonesian law in sentencing, particularly for corruption perpetrators. Of the 115 respondents, 71.3% (approximately 82 people) agreed that gender bias influences the legal process, while 28.7% (approximately 33 people) disagreed. This view aligns with previous research indicating that gender stereotypes can influence the perceptions of judges and law enforcement in assessing a case (Jones, 2018). Furthermore, differences in sentencing based on gender indicate inconsistencies in the application of supposedly universal principles of justice.

The survey results showed that the majority of respondents answered "yes" to the question "Does the punishment for corruption depend on the amount of damage they cause?". Of the 115 respondents, 66.1% (approximately 76 people) answered "yes," while 33.9% (approximately 39 people) answered "no." This finding indicates that public opinion tends to link the severity of punishment to the financial impact of corruption. However, other factors, such as the perpetrator's position or power, often influence public perception of appropriate punishment (Putra, 2021).

The majority of respondents answered "yes" to the question "Is there a difference in public treatment of corruption cases committed by men and women?" Of the 115 respondents, 73% (approximately 84 people) answered "yes," while 27% (approximately 31 people) answered "no." These results indicate a high level of public awareness of the double standard in addressing corruption cases based on the perpetrator's gender. This

difference in treatment is often reflected in media coverage and differing social responses to male and female corruptors (Williams, 2019).

Based on the data collected, the majority of research participants disagreed with the notion that male corruptors are more easily forgiven by society. Of the 115 respondents, 77.4% (approximately 89 people) disagreed, while 22.6% (approximately 26 people) agreed. These findings challenge the common assumption that society is more tolerant of corruption committed by men. However, it's worth considering that this response may be influenced by increased public awareness of corruption issues in general, regardless of the perpetrator's gender (Nugroho, 2020).

The data above shows that the majority of respondents believe that corruption cases committed by women attract more public attention than those committed by men. Of the 115 respondents, 56.5% (approximately 65 people) agreed, while 43.5% (approximately 50 people) disagreed. This indicates that media coverage often emphasizes gender aspects in corruption cases involving women. Overemphasizing the gender of female perpetrators can distract from the substance of the case and reduce the perpetrators to their gender identity alone (Wulandari, 2017).

The majority of respondents believe that media framing influences public perception of appropriate punishment for female corruption perpetrators. Of the 115 respondents, 89.6% (approximately 103 people) agreed, while 10.4% (approximately 12 people) disagreed. This very high percentage underscores the crucial role of the media in shaping public opinion. The use of certain narratives by the media can reinforce gender stereotypes, ultimately influencing how society perceives appropriate punishment (Susanto, 2019).

The data obtained shows that the majority of respondents believe that Indonesian law still considers gender-related considerations in making decisions. Of the 115 respondents, 77.4% (approximately 89 people) agreed, while 22.6% (approximately 26 people) disagreed. This belief demonstrates public distrust in the neutrality of the legal system. The inclusion of gender considerations in the legal process could conflict with the principle of equality before the law, which should be a fundamental foundation of the justice system (Harahap, 2016).

To complement the quantitative data, respondents were also given the opportunity to openly express their views on gender bias in the Indonesian legal system. Based on the results of the open-ended question, 49.6% (approximately 57 people) of respondents believed that differences in corruption sentences were more influenced by other factors, such as the perpetrator's position or bribery practices within the justice system. As one respondent stated, "When the perpetrator of corruption is a high-ranking official, the punishment is always different whether the perpetrator is male or female. It's a matter of power, not gender." This view underscores the dominance of structural factors in the justice system. However, 41.7% (approximately 48 people) actually saw gender bias as still strongly influencing judges' decisions, with respondents stating, "Women who are corrupt are often considered 'just following their husbands' or 'don't know anything,' so their sentences are light." Meanwhile, 8.7% (approximately 10 people) did not answer the question. This diverse range of views demonstrates that bias in the legal system is not a single phenomenon, but rather a complex interaction between gender, power, and social status (Putri, 2018).

Based on the available data, researchers obtained answers regarding the aspects highlighted in reporting on corruption cases involving women. Of the 115 respondents, 64.3% (approximately 74 people) stated that the emphasis in the reporting was on

stereotypes. One respondent stated, "The media tends to emphasize the emotional aspects, family background, or even the physical appearance of the woman." Furthermore, 18.3% (approximately 21 people) stated that reporting also emphasized the amount of corruption committed by the perpetrator, as one respondent expressed, "Usually the media focuses more on the luxurious lifestyle, appearance, or brand of clothing worn during trials." Meanwhile, 3.5% (approximately 4 people) answered that the media reported on the punishments, and 13.9% (approximately 16 people) did not answer. These findings confirm that the media often treats women's corruption cases differently, which tends to reinforce existing gender stereotypes in society (Prasetyo, 2021).

The majority of respondents (66.1%, or approximately 76 people) stated that the legal system in Indonesia is still influenced by gender bias in public perception. Respondents argued that differences in gender-based perceptions lead to unfair legal treatment. As one respondent responded, "In my opinion, gender bias in legal treatment in Indonesia is still quite pronounced. Sometimes women are treated more leniently because they are considered 'weak' or have family responsibilities, while on the other hand, women can also be more marginalized if their actions are deemed inconsistent with their image." This view illustrates that the law in Indonesia is not entirely fair. Furthermore, 19.1% of respondents (approximately 22 people) stated that there is no gender bias. They argued that punishment should be based on the act, not gender. Meanwhile, 14.8% (approximately 17 people) did not answer. This debate underscores the complexity of the issue of gender bias, which extends beyond the legal system to encompass how society views gender roles (Wibowo, 2020).

Based on the overall data obtained through the ten questions, several important findings emerged. First, public perception of the law in Indonesia indicates that gender bias remains a significant issue. This is indicated by the high percentage of respondents who agreed that gender influences legal sentences (Q1: 71.3%), differences in public attitudes toward male and female corruption perpetrators (Q3: 73%), and the belief that Indonesian law takes gender into account (Q7: 77.4% and Q10: 66.1%). These findings align with the theory of Ambivalent Sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), which divides sexism into Benevolent Sexism (protective sexism) and Hostile Sexism (hostile sexism). Public perception that over-emphasizes cases of female corruption (Q5: 56.5%) indicates hostile sexism, where women who violate social norms are directly attacked. Furthermore, the assumption that women are “just following their husbands” or “weak” demonstrates benevolent sexism, which subtly demeans women (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Second, media framing plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of female corruption perpetrators. 89.6% of respondents (Q6) acknowledged that media framing influences the punishment deemed appropriate. The media tends to emphasize non-substantive aspects, such as physical appearance, family background, and personal life of female perpetrators (Q9), in contrast to reporting on male corruption, which focuses more on power, political networks, or the extent of state losses. This suggests that media coverage often replicates and reinforces gender stereotypes prevalent in society, ultimately influencing public judgment of a case (Entman, 1993).

Third, survey data indicates that gender considerations are still considered an element of the legal process in Indonesia. In Q7, 77.4% of respondents stated that the law still considers gender factors in decision-making. This raises critical questions about the consistency of the law, which should not be discriminatory. This phenomenon is clarified in Q10 data, where 66.1% of respondents believe there are differences in legal treatment, sometimes more burdensome for women, depending on inherent stereotypes. Gender

discrimination in the justice system not only harms women but also undermines the integrity of the law as a whole (MacKinnon, 2005).

Fourth, although most respondents acknowledged the influence of gender bias, some argued that structural factors, such as the perpetrator's position or bribery practices, also influence legal sentences. In an open-ended question (Q8), 49.6% of respondents believed that differences in sentencing were due more to social status and political influence than solely to gender. However, another 41.7% of respondents emphasized that gender bias played a significant role. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of gender and power structures in shaping sentencing outcomes and public perception (Putra, 2018).

Based on these findings, it is clear that the perception of corruption is not a monolith but a complex interplay of various factors. While the public recognizes that corruption is influenced by an individual's power and social status, there is a pervasive belief that gender stereotypes significantly impact how both perpetrators and the legal system are perceived. This dual perspective highlights a critical area for legal and social reform, as it suggests that achieving true justice requires not only addressing institutional corruption but also dismantling the implicit biases that shape public and judicial views. The intersection of gender and power in shaping legal outcomes demands a more nuanced approach to reform, one that acknowledges and actively works to correct both structural inequities and unconscious biases.

Conclusion

Based on the research results and discussion, it can be concluded that gender bias remains a crucial issue in the Indonesian legal system, particularly in corruption cases. Questionnaire data indicates that the public perceives women as often treated differently due to social stereotypes and biased media framing. This finding is consistent with sociological and legal theories that identify two forms of sexism in public perception: protective and hostile. Furthermore, this study also found that structural factors such as power, position, and bribery influence legal verdicts, demonstrating the complex interaction between gender and social hierarchy. Therefore, it is crucial for legal institutions to rethink their standards of justice and adopt oversight and human resource management systems that are more sensitive to social and gender bias. These efforts are crucial not only for realizing the ideal of legal justice but also for rebuilding public trust in a fairer and more equitable justice system. Equal legal protection for all citizens is a key pillar in realizing a democratic and just nation.

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