
The Stigma of Widows in Jokes: An Analysis of Symbolic Violence

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Abstract:

This research investigates the phenomenon of symbolic violence in language practices, focusing on the stigmatization of divorced women in Indonesian society. Employing a literature review approach, the study examines public discourse, particularly jokes made by political figures specifically former gubernatorial candidate pairs in Indonesia's 2024 regional election that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Through an analysis of news coverage, scholarly literature, and relevant theoretical frameworks, the study explores how patriarchal structures normalize derogatory language and social stigma toward divorced women. The findings suggest that such symbolic violence is deeply embedded in everyday communication and is reinforced by figures in positions of power, contributing to the marginalization of women who do not conform to traditional marital expectations. This research aims to advance critical discourse on gender, language, and social power by highlighting the subtle yet impactful ways language perpetuates gender inequality. The study's implications underscore the need for greater sensitivity in public language use and call for educational interventions to challenge and transform discriminatory narratives.

Keyword: Symbolic violence, divorced women, stigma against divorced women, habitus, language

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INTRODUCTION

Widowhood has recently become a topic that has caused a lot of discourse battles among Indonesian society, thanks to the stigma inherent due to the social construction of the image of divorced women. This is reflected in the expression of Suswono, the candidate for deputy governor of DKI Jakarta number 01 for the 2024 Regional Head Election, in his speech on October 26, 2024, at the CSO declaration event in South Jakarta, where he suggested that rich widows marry unemployed youth in order to improve the welfare of the community (Indonesia, 2024). The statement was wrapped in a joke in response to residents' remarks about the widow's card in the context of the Orphan Card program carried by paslon 01, stating that single parents such as widows are included in the welfare program (Sulistya & Saputra, 2024). Suswono ensured that the card was certainly available, but only for poor widows, while rich widows were proposed to marry unemployed or jobless youths. This joke was made with the intention that rich widows could help provide opportunities for underprivileged youth to improve their quality of life, but in the end, it drew criticism from various circles. Apart from Suswono juxtaposing this with the relationship between the Prophet and Khadijah, which was considered irrelevant, the joke also had a sexist and degrading tone, which should not be stated by public officials, as said by Ronaldo Zulfikar,

Vice Chairman of the Muhammadiyah Youth Regional Executive (PWPM) DKI Jakarta (Miranti, 2024). Furthermore, Chico Hakim, the spokesperson for candidate pair number 03, highlighted the unworthiness of Suswono's sense of humor as a candidate for leadership, which places women as objects and jokes so as to hurt one specific group (Khorunikmah & Fajriadi, 2024). Two days after his statement, Suswono also apologized and clarified his offensive joke, admitting that his statement regarding widowhood had caused a polemic and discredited the Prophet (Syarifuddin, 2024).

However, this joke involving the stigma of widowhood is not the last from politicians, because the following month, on November 16, 2024, to be precise, the Suswono couple in running for the 2024 Regional Elections, Ridwan Kamil, brought up the same thing in his campaign (Guise, 2024). A video circulated on social media highlighted the specific part where Ridwan Kamil explained in his speech that poor widows would be promised to be prospered and supported by him and his colleagues, mentioned one by one. The joke was stated in the context of responding to the expression of a single parent woman who poured out the general problems of women with similar conditions, with the intention that all parties who support Ridwan Kamil in the 2024 Regional Elections are also concerned and embrace women, especially single mothers (Sulistya & Saputra, 2024). In the field, the joke was seen to be greeted with enthusiasm by the audience who witnessed it firsthand, in contrast to the virtual realm of social media where criticism of Ridwan Kamil's statement was widely expressed, especially on platform X, which even recorded the word "widow" as a trending topic. Some disappointment was expressed in various netizens' posts on X because Ridwan Kamil's joke had a sexist connotation and indicated that widows were objects that could be divided. Like Suswono, Ridwan Kamil a few days later offered an apology for his statement, which was considered negligent in a context such as the campaign, explaining that the choice of his diction at that time was not appropriate, thus inviting a lot of criticism from various citizens. Supporting Ridwan Kamil's apology, Angkie Yudistia as the spokesperson for candidate number 01 added that the RIDO team actually intends to pay special attention to women through several women's empowerment programs that will be launched if the candidate she supports is elected (Indonesia, 2024).

The researcher uses symbolic violence as the main concept that is the starting point for the normalization of the stigma against widows in Indonesian society. Symbolic violence was first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in his book, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), which is described as an invisible force exerted on groups that are unaware that they are the target of that power. Symbolic violence has a mechanism that is divided in two ways: euphemism and sensorism, where euphemisms refer to the operationalization of symbolic violence that is carried out in a subtle and invisible manner, while sensorism refers to the use of symbolic violence to maintain certain moral values related to honorable standards such as politeness, purity, generosity, and others (Amirulloh, 2019; Ningtyas, 2015). Fatmawati and Sholikin (2020) explain that symbolic violence reflects the power relationship between the dominant and the dominated party. However, more than just highlighting the superiority of a person's

status or position over the object of domination, symbolic violence is basically an act of vilifying or weakening the authority of marginalized groups as powerless parties (Frasetya & Nasution, 2021). Bourdieu (1991) also connects symbolic violence with language as a symbol, where the role of language is often unrealized in the practice of power so that it is used as an instrument of violence to inject ideology subtly or inconspicuously until it is accepted or believed as fact and can ultimately create its own reality (Musdawati, 2018). In other words, whoever holds symbolic power, they are in control of the symbols expressed through language so that they are able to construct a view of what is truth or reality according to their own interests. The holder of this control, Musdawati (2018) continued, is the one who occupies the highest position in the social strata based on the capital owned, both economic, social, cultural, and symbolic (status); the dominant group. In connection with the topic raised in this study, the researcher will borrow the concept of symbolic violence to explain the act of discrediting widows as reflected in jokes as a symbol of language, as raised by public figures Suswono and Ridwan Kamil in their respective campaign periods as a pair of DKI Jakarta gubernatorial candidates during the 2024 regional election.

Some of the supporting concepts discussed in this study are stigma, which explains that widow stigma is nothing but a form of symbolic violence. Parker & Anggleton (2003) explained that symbolic violence in the form of stigma serves to support the interests of the dominant group so as to produce and perpetuate power relations and inequality. Link and Phelan (2014, as cited in Guise, (Guise, 2024) then developed this thinking and introduced the idea of stigma power, which is used as a tool for interested groups with the aim of keeping people down (keeping people in), and excluded (keeping people away), where this stigma power results from symbolic violence that legitimizes a series of dominant power relations so that the others accept their lower position in the hierarchy of the social order due to the stigma that has been internalized in themselves.

In addition, the researcher also examined the concept of habitus also initiated by Bourdieu which, in connection with this research, explains how the stigma of widowhood has taken root in Indonesian society, and reveals the power relations contained in it. Sartika et al. (2021) understand habitus as an internalized product resulting from the structure of the social world, where this is manifested in the form of attitudes and character habits that a person has based on their experience and life history during their lifetime and becomes the basis for the person to act or think. However, Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2002) explains that habitus is more than just a habit, and has more complex properties, as influenced by individual (parenting) and collective (environmental conditions or values embraced by the society in which a person grows up). Therefore, there are differences in the habitus owned by certain social groups and other social groups, so that in terms of power relations, habitus is spread and instilled strongly by the dominant group to the subordinate group in order to maintain a position and ideology that benefits the dominant group in the social class (Fatmawati & Sholikin, 2020). This is in line with what is explained in Bourdieu (1977) that the application of symbolic power is often disguised by cultural aspects so that it appears to be veiled, even misrecognized, by both the

benefited and the disadvantaged, where this element of unconsciousness is advantageous to the group in power because it allows their interests to be achieved in an inconspicuous way (Link & Phelan, 2014).

With the high public attention to the image of widows, it is important to examine how the stigma is built and seems to be widely accepted as normal. It is also important to find out whether behind the discourse battle that occurs in society, there is a separate domination agenda that is preserved. Therefore, the research question that arises is how the jokes of public officials imply symbolic violence against widows. In addition, the research aims not only to describe the phenomenon, but also to offer a critical reading of the symbolic power practices hidden behind political humor and to strengthen gender-based social structures in Indonesia. Previous research by Nashruddin (2021) examined the portrayal of widows in Indonesian media, identifying how language subtly constructs negative stereotypes, but fell short of framing these portrayals within a broader theory of power relations. Meanwhile, Ismail and Utami (2022) focused on humor in political campaigns, noting how sexist jokes can shape public perception but did not delve into the sociological effects of such discourse on marginalized groups like widows. Both studies offer valuable insights into representation and discourse but do not connect these expressions to a systemic structure of symbolic domination. This current research fills that gap by employing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence to analyze how jokes by influential political figures (e.g., Suswono and Ridwan Kamil) not only reflect but actively perpetuate the stigma against widows in Indonesia. By connecting symbolic language use with power and stigma, this research adds theoretical depth to existing discourse analysis and brings forward a gendered reading of political humor in the Indonesian socio-political landscape.

This study aims to critically examine how jokes made by public figures during political campaigns serve as instruments of symbolic violence against widows in Indonesia, using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework. It also explores how these utterances normalize patriarchal power structures and contribute to the systemic marginalization of divorced women. The findings of this study are expected to offer significant contributions to gender discourse and media literacy, especially in the context of political communication. Practically, the research provides a basis for advocating more ethical language practices in public leadership and contributes to gender-sensitive policy formulation by exposing the latent ideologies embedded in political humor.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a literature review method to critically evaluate various academic sources and trusted news outlets relevant to symbolic violence against widowed women in Indonesian public discourse. The data sources included scientific journal articles, key reference books by Pierre Bourdieu, credible mainstream media, and social media documentation. Source selection was carried out selectively based on topic relevance, credibility, and their relation to symbolic violence, social stigma, and political language

practices. The study categorized main themes such as symbolic violence, widow stigma, social habitus, and resistance to symbolic domination. Critical analysis linked theoretical concepts to the practice of political jokes biased against widowed women. Findings from various sources were then integrated to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the normalization of stigma against widows in Indonesian society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Great Indonesian Dictionary defines a widow as an adult woman who no longer has a husband due to divorce or death. A neutral status to mean that the woman is no longer married. Apart from this neutral definition, in fact, Indonesian people's view of widows has created stereotypes that cause shame for women who are associated with this status (Saraswati, 2019). This can be due to the traditional Indonesian culture that generally sees married women as the ones who take care of and care for family members so that they are responsible for the harmony of their family, which means that the choice to divorce will have an effect on the views of others who think that they have failed to carry out their duties properly. Furthermore, Pranawati (2017) in Saraswati (2019) stated that the Marriage Law of 1974 has a role in this gender bias. Moreover, if we consider article 34 paragraph (2) in the Law which states that "The wife is obliged to manage household affairs as well as possible". In this case, in connection with Suswono's speech, the joke about widows in his speech was a form of symbolic violence, especially in the statement, "I suggest rich widows please marry unemployed youth," when discussing the context of programs to encourage the improvement of people's welfare, which gives the connotation that widows should also bear the responsibility for the welfare of disadvantaged groups (in this case unemployed youth). The phrase also discredits widows that the economic achievements they build and own are not entirely their rights because there are other groups (youth not yet working) that they need to serve.

In addition, regarding other stigmas about widows, Mahy et al. (2015), explain that because they have left the marriage bond, widows are perceived to be free to pursue their own satisfaction without supervision or control from a man. However, instead of carrying a positive image of freedom itself, widowhood—more specifically divorced widows—is associated with a negative image that is closely associated with sexual connotations. Widows are considered sexually experienced because they have lived a married life, even this connotation is reinforced in the context of widows (young widows) by their age who still seems new in their sexual life where they are perceived to have unmet sexual needs and actively look for men to become new partners after divorce (Mahy et al., 2015). Thus, the stigma related to widowhood often damages women's values because it is attached to immoral meanings so that it is difficult for them to gain respect from society after holding this status (L. Parker & Creese, 2016). The sexual connotation of this widow stigma is also heard in Suswono's statement, namely, "Mothers, don't GR, ma'am, yes. Don't assume that the widow is married to the governor," when talking about orphans—that they will later become

the governor's foster children. This is because the statement justifies the dominant discourse that widows are available and actively seeking men. Ridwan Kamil in his campaign also implied this stigma in his statement, "If it is suitable, Bang Ryan will marry it."

The stigma of widowhood that is formed today is nothing but a product of patriarchal ideology that has been constructed into something normal and commonplace so that it is naturally adopted in Indonesian society in various aspects of life (Amal et al., 2021) or in other words has become a habitus. This can be seen from the duality of views towards divorced people, where widows are stigmatized that they have failed to maintain family harmony and are associated with sexual stereotypes, while widowers are not stigmatized. As Parker (2016) explains in his research, this is rooted in women's deviation from what is considered the norm about marriage and sexuality, so that the stigma of widowhood is not only concerned with morality but also intersects with gender issues.

Platt (2010) in Parker (2016) also found that in the context of research on the Sasak Muslim community in Lombok, generally the view of the community, especially married women, towards widows is that widows are a potential threat to their marriages. In addition, Platt (2010) added that there is also a view that if the husband cheats, the wife will indirectly be blamed. This seems to support a patriarchal ideology in which women have no power and men are free from mistakes and negative views; If there is an act of infidelity in marriage, the widow as a third party is used as an object to blame, and the cheated wife is also blamed because she is considered to have failed to serve her husband. This is supported by the statement of Single Parents Indonesia in Motion member, Hadyana Pratitha Rahayu who in her response to Ridwan Kamil's speech revealed that 75% of divorced widows do not get child support based on research conducted by their community (Christian, 2024), which clearly violates article 41 of Law No.1 of 1974 concerning Marriage which stipulates that both parents remain bound in the obligation to prosper and provide for their children after divorce, "But until now, there have been no criminal sanctions for fathers who have failed to fulfill their responsibilities." While the father is free from social judgment and legal sanctions, the mother receives social sanctions as well as an inherent negative image because he is considered to have failed to maintain family harmony.

Furthermore, given the position of Suswono and Ridwan as men and holders of the status of public officials, they are considered representatives of the dominant group that benefits from the dynamics of Indonesian society based on patriarchal ideology, so it makes sense that they find it difficult to realize that their responses regarding widows actually lower the dignity of widows in the eyes of the public. Moreover, the stigma of widowhood was expressed by Suswono and Ridwan Kamil in the form of jokes, which can give a connotation that stigmatization of widows is not a serious thing and does not deserve more attention from the public. Thus, jokes as a symbol of language become an instrument to carry out symbolic violence subtly, which makes the stigmatization of widows widely accepted, and has an impact on the act of preserving the patriarchal ideology that dominates in society.

From the analysis above, it seems that Indonesian society has justified the act of stigmatizing widows and the stigma of widows themselves, where this behavior is supported by a social system that leans towards patriarchal ideology. However, while it seems to have been widely normalized, social media allows people to freely express their opinions about the stigma and build new discourses that have the potential to shift the old narrative as internalized in society related to widowhood. This is evidenced by various criticisms that have arisen, such as the response of former Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Susi Pudjiastuti on the X social media platform where she posted, "I'm happy to be a widow. It's better to work for no one. Proud to be yourself. Let's talk about what we want to talk about?" in response to Ridwan Kamil's statement (Henry, 2024). A female activist and Founder of the non-profit organization for women's empowerment Perempuan Without Stigma, Poppy Dihardjo also spoke up to defend the widow group by writing an Open Letter from the Widow for Mr. RK which was uploaded through the Instagram account of Magdalene, a media organization focused on women, where the letter basically expressed her disappointment and criticized that Ridwan Kamil's statement was nothing but a form of discrimination against widows (Dihardjo, 2024).

Apart from social media, criticism also appeared directly as said by the Head of Advocacy #SaveJanda Nanda Ismael in Alinea.id (Christian, 2024) where he disobeyed Suswono's advice regarding rich widows, "Unemployment is not correlated with marrying rich widows. Unemployment is the most obvious form of the government's failure to provide jobs and other related matters." According to Nanda, Suswono's joke, if it is intended to offer solutions for equitable welfare or overcome poverty, is irrelevant and is a logical flaw that shows lazy thinking behavior. A number of stigmas closely associated with widowhood will also have the potential to be exacerbated by marrying unemployed youth, instead of disappearing. Criticism was also expressed by former Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan in a viral video in which he strongly opposed the stigmatization of widows carried out by his two successor candidates, arguing that jokes that indicated suggestions to widows to return to relationships with men would only perpetuate the wrong perspective (Khotimah & Opita, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Stigmatization of widows remains prevalent in public discourse, often overlooked due to the normalization of negative stereotypes rooted in patriarchal systems and perpetuated through language, including jokes by public figures such as Ridwan Kamil and Suswono. Social media, however, has provided a space for resistance, enabling individuals to challenge dominant narratives and expose the symbolic violence experienced by widows in Indonesia. These acts of resistance not only highlight the need to dismantle deep-seated patriarchal habitus and false consciousness but also encourage society to reflect on prejudices and foster more respectful attitudes toward widows. Future research could further explore how digital

activism and online communities contribute to changing perceptions and reducing the stigma against widows in Indonesian society.

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