

The Role of Women in Fostering Family Economy in Rural Sumatra Indonesia: A Case Study

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Abstract

Despite the prevalent portrayal of women as primarily responsible for household affairs, it is crucial to acknowledge that women have the potential to become strategic actors in improving the economic prosperity of their families. The purpose of this study is to examine the significant contributions and pivotal role played by women in advancing the economic well-being of families through working in the oil palm industry in rural Sumatra, Indonesia. By focusing on the unique context of Sumatra, the research sheds light on the specific challenges faced by women and highlights their efforts to improve the family economy by working in the oil palm sector. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach, the data obtained by conducting direct observations and interviews with women in various rural communities. Additionally, husbands were also interviewed, and questionnaires were distributed to community leaders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic at play. The findings of this study emphasise the empowering effects of women's employment on their economic status, decision-making power, and overall well-being, while also discussing the potential implications for gender dynamics within the household and the broader community. This study also calls government policy interventions and support mechanisms to further enhance empowerment of women's group at rural communities in accelerating a sustainable development.

Keywords: Women, Rural Sumatra, Economic, Prosperity, Indonesia, Family Economy, Empowerment

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Introduction

In all over the world, the male labour force is dominating great number as compared to women labour force, which is still less than half percent of the total proportion, the percentage of worldwide number of female labour force in 2022 reached 39,289% compared to male in the same year at 60,711% (International Labor Office, 2022). It is because traditionally and socially speaking, in most of third world countries like Indonesia and especially in rural areas, the neediness of house and the domestic works are the responsibility of women and thus women are not mended to work in a sector where they have to exert full force like coolies and lift heavy things (Kurniasih, M. Yusup, and Kuswarno 2018). During the period of life-cycle, the women mostly tend to leave their job to raise children and give birth, to some degree the women subsequently returning to work but often at a lower rate (International Labour Organization 2021). According to Azizah (2019), the discrimination against women in the workforce still persists in the society especially in the formal sector, and women tend to be under-presented. This condition leaves a double burden on women, since women must carry out their domestic roles at home such as taking care of children and also have to make a living to meet family needs.

Rural areas in Sumatra face specific challenges related to economic opportunities, limited resources, and access to markets. These challenges are often exacerbated by gender disparities, where women have traditionally been marginalized and their contributions undervalued. However, recent trends indicate that women play a crucial role in shaping the economic landscape of rural communities in Indonesia and play a significant role to keep the stability of family's economy. The wife from a lower

income family generally more active than the wife from a middle-class income family. A study conducted by Australia Indonesia Partnership for Economic Governance (2021) reports that the Indonesian wives who leave in rural areas represent large number of labour force in the self-employed informal sector, including the agricultural sectors, as the formal sector jobs often difficult to access in the regional areas, this condition have imposed a women in rural Indonesia to have been actively involved in various agricultural activities, including in the oil palm sector.

This research aims to shed light on the important role played by women in rural Sumatra, where the men income on self-employed in the agricultural sector are less enough to meet the economic well-being of their families. Most of them have low-level family economy, thus, the women participation to support the family's economy is indeed needed. This study seeks to identify the specific challenges faced by women and the strategies they employ to improve the family economy. Although, the social stigma of gender stereotypes still perceive in the rural society, the fact that the people in rural areas and most of village leaders try their best to encourage women to work in helping the family's economy (Krug, Drasch, and Gans 2019). This indicates the openness of the people in the village in terms of giving women opportunities to work, as compared to urban women who still argues that muscle work on the farm is inappropriate for women (Lubis, Napitupulu, and Izzah 2022). While the involvement of village women in the palm oil agricultural sector is significant to support the family's economy, their ability to access the resources for expanding the business is still limited, due to low budget, and lack of will from the decision-makers, and other government sectors to empower the women (Eliana

and Ratina 2007; Kurniasih, M. Yusup, and Kuswarno 2018; Azizah, Qoyum, and Prasojo 2019).

The study implements a qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews, observations, and data from various rural communities in Sumatra. By engaging directly with women and other key stakeholders, the research aims to capture the diverse experiences, perspectives, and strategies employed by women to prosper the family economy. The findings will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on gender and rural development, with a specific focus on the economic empowerment of women in rural Sumatra.

In short, this research is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it will investigate the case of a wife working in the palm oil agricultural sector in South Sumatra, Indonesia, by applying best practice perspective issued by the International Development Law Organization (2013) which includes strengthening the family economy, skills, community empowerment, and economic opportunity. Secondly, it will provide empirical evidence of the impact of women's economic contributions on household income to a possible change of social stigma on gender stereotypes for the people in rural areas in term of employment opportunities, socio-economic development, societal environment aspects, and women skills. Additionally, the research will explore the enabling factors and constraints that affect women's participation in the economy, such as social support networks, resources and skills education.

By understanding the experiences and strategies of women in rural Sumatra, this research will contribute to the broader discourse on women's empowerment in Indonesia. Moreover, it will enlighten the policy makers and development practitioners about the government

interventions that address the challenges and needs faced by rural women, and prioritizing women workers in developing the rural economy which will ultimately fostering sustainable economic growth and reducing poverty in rural Sumatra, Indonesia.

Literature Review and Study Context

Except for two studies conducted by Mehraban et al. (2022) and Suwena, Irwansyah, and Suwendra (2021), we have not come across any other research that focuses on the women's role in helping prosper the family economy on agricultural sector in rural Indonesia. Mehraban et al. (2022) primarily focuses on investigating the relationship between the women's role on family's decision-making power and the impact of women's income earning on oil palm cultivation in intra-household gender roles. In a similar vein, Suwena, Irwansyah, and Suwendra (2021), although do not exactly focus on the oil palm sector, but the study was conducted on women role in family economic resilience and look into the attempt of women in supporting the household and community economic survival in rural areas of Bali.

Another relevant study by Ruml et al. (2022) specifically concentrates on the role of oil palm for rural development between Ghana and Indonesia, and explore factors such as policy, macro and micro level, and small holder inclusion in agro-industrial production.

In contrast, this research offers a unique lens into the role of women in the context of Sumatra's rural economy. It takes into account the oil palm sectors in the regions and investigates the impact of women's involvement in these sectors on household income, employment opportunities, and overall socio-economic development. By providing a localized perspective on the role of women in rural Sumatra, this study aims to gain insights into the women's

economic empowerment in rural areas, while also informing policymakers, development practitioners, and community leaders about the specific challenges and opportunities faced by women in Sumatra, and the potential for targeted interventions to enhance their economic prospects and overall well-being.

Methodology

This is a sustained study using qualitative sociological research to find out a detail description of best practices in empowering women and producing a solution of a particular problem in rural South Sumatra. The techniques of data collection include identifying problems, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, interpreting data and evaluating the results or reflections. In this study, the interviews were conducted to the Kelompok Wanita Tani (KWT)/farmer women's group. This KWT consists of women who are the wives of the oil palm farmer in the area, which has 60 members and has cultivated a palm oil as an effort to increase the income and welfare. Their husbands and the community leaders in the area were also interviewed. The questions which are covered includes the topic of women empowerment, impacts on family economy, women skills in agriculture, financial resources and working opportunities. The records are analysed using the theory of ILO best perspective for women empowerment focusing on getting the information about the changes of social stigma of gender in rural society, government involvement in women empowerment and family economy. The data were obtained through Kantor Kepala Desa di Kecamatan Sukamerindu, Lahat (The Village Head Offices in subdistrict of Sukamerindu, district of Lahat, South Sumatra) and the KWT members and their husbands. Secondary data from other sources such as internet, blogs, video, and

newspapers were also analysed. 130 questionnaires were disbursed to 60 members of KWT and their husbands including 10 community leaders of rural areas from 10 villages to obtain their responses related to women empowerment and their role to support family economy.

Result

The Role of Women and Obstacles to Work in Rural South Sumatra

South Sumatra has plentiful natural products and mostly plantation in the field of palm oil, thus making a large number of South Sumatrans become farmers in this sector. While farmers can make money in this agricultural sector, the average source of income for rural farmers is poor. It is because the farmers have a small agricultural land, and little income due to small production capacity. Most of them are cultivators on other people's plantations or have their own oil palm plantations with an average area of no more than 2 hectares. As of 2021 about 72.18 percent of total farmers in South Sumatra are small-scale farmers with an average net income of IDR 5.23 million per annum (IRR 14,605,565), which is far below the poverty line (Badan Pusat Statistik 2022). This is also the reasons why most of the men are having a low-level family economy in rural areas, and the reason for the women to work or running a small business to support family economies.

South Sumatra women have wide-ranging education level, from primary school to bachelor's degree, with many of them are just at the secondary school level. Based on this low level of education, it is important to improve the capability and skills to work in their area of interest. The skills are mostly obtained by them through daily practice in doing and

sharing an informal experience. Such as when they have skill to cultivate the palm oil then they start providing fertilizer, grazing, removing shoots, and transporting palm fruit to the shelter. This condition indicates that, although there are many financial and other obstacles faced by the women in rural areas, they still have great willingness to work and help the family economy. Their difficulties are exacerbated by the lack of capital for gardening and access to subsidized fertilizers from the government.

Based on in-dept interviews and questionnaires with the women of KWT

and their husbands it was revealed that they cannot afford to buy the fertilizers and the subsidized fertilizers do not reach to their village and that only particular people can access to this.

The Impact of Women Participation in the Family Economy

The respondents in this research include both wives and husbands of palm oil farmers from different age groups as well as the community leaders from 10 villages in subdistrict of Sukamerindu.

Table : 1 Profile of Respondents in subdistrict of Sukamerindu, South Sumatra

No	Category of Respondents	f	%
I	Spouses and Classes		
1.	Wives	60	50
2.	Husbands	60	50
	Total	120	100
II	Age		
1.	15-25 years old	10	8
2.	26-45 years old	65	57
3.	46-60 years old	45	35
	Total	120	100
III	Education		
1.	Primary School	33	25
2.	Secondary School	75	58
3.	Bachelor Degree	22	17
	Total	120	100

Source: data produced by the author

The women mostly agreed that their involvement in working as a menial labourer in the palm oil field had helped their husband to strengthen the family economy, beside that the women also considered that their activities in this sector had contributed to increasing their ability in agricultural skills. However, a small proportion of husbands do not agree their wives to work, because they feel their wives are neglecting household chores to look after the children at home

and feel threatened by the weakening their wives' trust in their husbands in term of earning a living.

As little as 25% of the respondents regarded that husband might loss trust in earning a living from their wives and the wife who able to earn income do neglect household chores is at 24%. However, a big portion of the husbands and wives perceived the role of women are able to raise their family income and increase the performance of their agricultural skills.

Table 2: Responses of Wives and Husbands on Strengthening Family Economy, and Skills.

No	Topics	SD		D		A		SA	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	The Income the women obtain from working in the palm oil field can help in supporting their husband and family economy.		6		8		16		70
2	Working as a cultivator in palm oil farm has helped the women to increase their agricultural skills		8		10		18		44
3	Women feel responsible to support the family economy and ignore the negative cultural stigma of gender stereotypes		12		4		16		66
4	Working in the palm oil field makes the women able to arrange their times between household chores and working.		2		24		26		32
5	The wife who's income can rise do not belittle the husband that affect the trust to husband in earning a living.		3		25		28		49
6	The income of their husband cannot be sufficient to meet the family needs.		13		8		21		44

Source: data produced by the author

Notes:

SD : Strongly Disagree

D : Disagree

A : Agree

SA : Strongly Agree

F : Frequencies

In response to community empowerment and economic opportunities, additional respondents were included from community leaders which is representing each village. The questionnaires were distributed to residents as given in the table 3 below.

There is a positive response on economic opportunity for women, where most of responses say that the government financial support to empower the women in rural areas can develop the agricultural sector and increase the production, by way of integrating employment and decent work into economic growth. Most of the respondents (75%-90%) agreed that the

distribution of subsidized fertilizers and the easy access to financial resources prerequisite for addressing the poverty in their area. However, the government still needs to fix the distribution chain of subsidized fertilizers to farmers in rural areas, since it is not uncommon for these fertilizers to be misused for political gain. In addition, it is still difficult for famers to access finance to get capital, making them unable to develop and receiving less attention. Some of respondents stated that they were forced to buy the subsidized fertilizers at a higher rate, and felt that the distribution of subsidized fertilizers do not reach their village.

Table 3: Profile of Respondents Including Community Leaders in Subdistrict of Sukamerindu, South Sumatra

No	Category of Respondents	f	%
I	Spouses and Classes		
1.	Wives	60	46
2.	Husbands	60	46
3.	Community leaders	10	8
	Total	130	100
II	Age		
1.	15-25 years old	10	8
2.	26-45 years old	75	57
3.	46-60 years old	45	35
	Total	130	100
III	Villages		
1.	Gunung Liwat	9	7
2.	Guru Agung	17	13
3.	Kapitan	20	15
4.	Karang Caya	8	6
5.	Pagar Kaya	18	14
6.	Rambai Kaca	9	7
7.	Sukamerindu	17	13
8.	Sukaraja	13	10
9.	Tanjung Agung	10	8
10.	Tanjung Raya	9	7
	Total	130	100

Source: data produced by the author

The women empowerment gives them a stronger position to develop the society. There are positive attitudes of society toward the women to be given opportunities to work in labour force by the respondents and the community leaders. Almost 70% of the interviewed respondents admitted that the women gain benefits from working in the palm oil field. Beside the women also need more knowledge and capital to develop their size of production. This indicates that women’s empowerment plays the role in decision making for their family welfare

as they do have an access of economy opportunities and make positive changes for the family. Yet, there is no well-arrangement of formal sector by the decision makers to support their financial strains, which if done can add value to women’s work in various business and increase their family income. As a result, the women feel compelled to do the male job and eventually end up in the oil palm plantations to help their husband.

Table 3: Responses of Community Leaders, Wives and Husbands on Community Empowerment and Economic Opportunity

No	Topics	SD		D		A		SA	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	The rural society accept and value the women to be given opportunities to work in a labour sector	3	6	1	1	3	2	75	5
2.	The women have limited access to financial resources in rural areas to increase their size of business	0	0	0	0	3	3	91	7
3.	The distribution of subsidized fertilizers is not fully able to reach whole farmers	0	0	0	0	1	1	11	9
4.	The government financial support to empower the women in rural areas can promote the development of agricultural sector in the area	2	2	2	1	2	2	81	6
5.	Empowering women in rural areas can open more economic opportunity in the area.	0	0	1	1	3	2	84	6
6.	With enough source of finance the women can increase the business size and do the better job instead of lower labour force	2	2	8	6	3	2	86	6

Source: data produced by the author

Notes:

SD : Strongly Disagree

D : Disagree

A : Agree

SA : Strongly Agree

F : Frequencies

Increasing women's participation in earning a living does not mean interfering with women's work in managing the household or encouraging women to be on an equal footing with men. The increased role of women in earning a living means that women's income has increased compared to before and apart from that, work experience has also increased.

This research argues that there has been a change of the stigma in the minds of rural society towards women who work as labourers force. It emphasises the need to provide the opportunity to rural women to access the same resources as men in order to increase their family's economy. At least there are three reasons behind the progress of achieving gender equality and the women empowerment particularly in rural South Sumatra. First, the low level of education and skills of women in rural South Sumatra, do not affect the women's ability to work and earn a living, as the women serve the ability to work in their

particular interest area in both the agricultural sector and other informal sectors. Secondly, when rural women do not have not have choice of employment, to provide for their families they tend to work in low-quality jobs and ignore cultural attitudes that shape women unsuitable for heavy lifting jobs. Lastly, there is a mature mindset in rural areas that successful women are women who able to work and generate profits to supplement their family income, and not only depend on their husband's income.

The Role of Women in The Context of Cultural Milieus and Social Environments.

The indispensable role of women in participating in economic development has prompted civil society in rural areas to encourage the women to be involved in the economic growth. This trend towards empowering women has induced the reduction of gender discriminatory and inheritance customary practices which are detrimental to women. Since the people in subdistrict of Sukamerindu are religious, the women held a monthly regular religious social gathering or pengajian dan arisan where the women can share their

daily activities in the farming and how they earn for living. Normally during the meeting, a woman shares her successful experience of making a living from the small business or the farming. This story than followed by other women who interested to do the same business or farming to follow this success story. In this way, the women has influenced the cultural milieu whereby the experience of some one business has created other competitors in the same market and led to the new business life cycles in the area.

This phenomenon has shaped the social and cultural environment in the rural areas, which developed the women spirit to be able to generate their family income. Based on in depth-interview with the community leaders in Sukamerindu, the rural women are the driving forces for achieving the transformational economic, social and environmental changes. Therefore, the government must stress the importance of women participation in developing the rural economics by providing the training activities to encourage their presence.

Economics Opportunity and Women Skills

Grassroots efforts to empower women are more affective when implemented in ‘top-down’ measures through the local authorities. However, the arrangement of adequate financial resources and measures to increase farmer’s productivity has not been well maintained by the authorities in South Sumatra. In fact, according to Indrianti (2018) said that, if this is done evenly in rural communities it will generate employment and encourage a sustainable and vibrant farming sector of rural areas.

The effort to distribute the subsidized fertilizers has failed to reach the whole rural farmers due to management and the lack of policy to support the farmers.

Besides that, there is no strong coordination between local authorities and farmers’ women group KWT to empower them through training programs and business meetings with local authorities and financial institutions that can improve their skills and knowledge to access the financial resource. Perhaps, the women can benefit from these programs and learning how to access the loan to increase their size of production or to start new business in the area. Therefore, it is recommended that the local authority needs to actively empower the women in rural South Sumatra through various empowerment programs, and continuously monitor them from the start of training and after the training to see what the outcome that they earned after these programs.

Conclusion

This study provides an insight the significant role that women play in improving the economic welfare of their families in rural Sumatra, Indonesia. By applying the theory of ILO best perspective for women empowerment, this study examines the specific challenges and strategies employed by women in cultivating the palm oil sector and gained valuable insights that women in rural area play a significant contribution in supporting their husband and increasing the family prosperity. The findings of this study add in the previous studies concerning the women empowerment in the labour force and the problems related to women’s right in the rural and urban areas (Kurniasih, M. Yusup, and Kuswarno 2018; Azizah, Qoyum, and Prasojo 2019; Eliana and Ratina 2007; Wulandari 2022; Mehraban et al. 2022; Suwena, Irwansyah, and Suwendra 2021).

Thus, this paper has achieved robust evidence in rural South Sumatra that the negative perception for women participation in labour force in economic development has decreased over time. This study confirmed that there was positive changes in social stigma regarding gender stereotypes that affect the mindset of the village community towards women who work as menial workers. The women in rural Sumatera have demonstrated resilience, resourcefulness, and become strategic actors in advancing their family economies, contributing to poverty reduction, and improving the well-being of their households. Therefore, this empirical research suggests that the local authority should enhance the women's skills and provide a support on women's economic activities and decision-making power. Recognising and leveraging these enabling factors can pave the way for sustainable development and gender equality in the region.

In conclusion, the results of this study emphasised the crucial role that women play in prospering the family economy in rural Sumatra, Indonesia. It has highlighted the increasing social awareness for empowering women in rural areas and providing recommendations to the local government in developing the rural economy. The findings of this research suggest that further enhance can be made to foster the successful of women empowerment in the economic sector. First, it can be carried out with a 'top-bottom' approach for targeted interventions and policies to address specific challenges faced by women. Second, government agencies and community organisations should collaborate with local partnerships to ensure that the program effectiveness and their eventual sustainability.

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