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license**DECOLONIZING GENDER ROLES: WOMEN'S  
EMBEDDED AGENCY IN FAMILY AND LIVELIHOOD  
SYSTEMS IN NOLLOTH VILLAGE, INDONESIA****Feky Manuputty<sup>1\*</sup>, Anike Jacomina M. Manuputty<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Universitas Pattimura, Jalan Ir, M. Putuhena, Ambon 97233,  
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[feky.manuputty@lecturer.unpatti.ac.id](mailto:feky.manuputty@lecturer.unpatti.ac.id)DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30598/baileofisipvol3iss3pp765-784>**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the decolonization of gender roles by analyzing women's embedded agency within family and livelihood systems in Nolloth Village, Indonesia. Challenging dominant global narratives that portray women as confined to domestic and marginalized roles, the study highlights the relational and context-specific dynamics of gender in a Global South island society. Using a qualitative intrinsic case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of everyday economic practices among fishing and farming households. Thematic and interpretive analysis reveals that women occupy strategic positions across the entire production chain. In fisheries, they manage processing, distribution, and market exchange, while in subsistence agriculture they participate from cultivation to harvest. These roles are not perceived as subordination but as integral to collective household responsibility, providing women with social recognition and decision-making influence. The findings advance the concept of embedded agency, demonstrating how women's power is enacted through integration within social and economic structures rather than overt resistance. By challenging rigid dichotomies such as domestic versus public and productive versus reproductive labor, this study contributes to decolonial sociology and feminist political economy, offering a context-sensitive framework for understanding gender in the Global South.*

**Keywords:** Agency, Decolonial Sociology, Feminist Political Economy, Gender Roles, Household Economy

**INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary debates in gender studies continue to be shaped by a powerful and often unexamined assumption: that women's experiences across the globe can be meaningfully understood through a shared narrative of marginalization, domestic confinement, and structural exclusion from productive economic life (Codina, 2025; McKinley, 2024; Tam & Yuen, 2025). While this narrative has been crucial in exposing inequalities and advocating for women's rights, it has also generated a tendency toward analytical universalism that risks flattening the diversity of women's lived realities, particularly in the Global South. In many small-scale and community-based economies, especially within island and maritime societies, gender roles are not easily reducible to dichotomies such as public versus domestic or productive versus reproductive labor (Arora-Jonsson, 2023; Tlostanova & Koobak, 2025; Tsouroufli et al., 2025). Instead, they are

embedded within relational systems of kinship, reciprocity, and collective survival. This study takes as its point of departure the empirical reality of Nolloth Village in Eastern Indonesia, where women are visibly and substantively involved in both household and livelihood systems, challenging dominant assumptions about gendered marginality.

The importance of revisiting this issue lies not only in correcting empirical misrepresentations but also in addressing deeper epistemological imbalances in global knowledge production. Scholars have long pointed out that mainstream sociological theories, including those in gender studies, are disproportionately shaped by Euro-American experiences and intellectual traditions (Carlson et al., 2025; Datta & Kibria, 2025; Ferretti, 2021). As a result, concepts such as patriarchy, agency, and empowerment are often applied in ways that do not fully resonate with the socio-cultural configurations of non-Western societies. In Indonesia, particularly in its eastern and island regions, women's participation in economic activities such as fisheries, agriculture, and informal trade is not an exception but a norm (Mejía-Montero, 2025; Weldon et al., 2023). Empirical observations indicate that women in these contexts frequently occupy strategic roles in processing, distributing, and marketing resources, thereby contributing directly to household resilience and community sustainability. Yet, these forms of participation are rarely theorized as expressions of agency in their own right; instead, they are often interpreted through frameworks that privilege resistance, autonomy, or individual empowerment as primary indicators of agency.

This disjuncture between lived reality and theoretical representation becomes particularly salient in the context of family-based production systems. In many rural and island communities, economic activities are organized around households rather than individuals, with labor divided along lines that are complementary rather than hierarchical (Hennessy et al., 2025; Horn & Maracle, 2026; Soler Caicedo & Escobar-Tello, 2024). Within such systems, women's work cannot be easily separated from men's work, nor can domestic responsibilities be disentangled from productive contributions. In Nolloth Village, preliminary observations suggest that women are actively involved in all stages of the fisheries value chain, from post-harvest processing to market exchange, as well as in subsistence agriculture. These roles are not perceived locally as burdens or constraints but as integral components of a shared livelihood strategy. This raises a critical question: to what extent do prevailing gender theories adequately capture the relational and embedded nature of women's roles in such contexts?

A growing body of literature has begun to question the universality of dominant gender frameworks by foregrounding context-specific forms of agency and social organization. For instance, Ali & Salam-Salmaoui (2024) conceptualizes agency not merely as the ability to make choices but as the capacity to define one's goals within given structural conditions. Similarly, Mahmood (2005) challenges liberal feminist assumptions by demonstrating that agency can be expressed through practices of conformity and ethical self-formation rather than resistance alone. In the field of feminist political economy, scholars such as Cormier-Salem (2024) and Woldegiorgis (2025) have emphasized the need to recognize unpaid and informal labor as central

to economic analysis, particularly in developing contexts. These perspectives open up analytical space for understanding women's roles beyond the narrow confines of formal employment and individual autonomy.

At the same time, research on Southeast Asia and Indonesia provides important empirical insights into the diversity of gender arrangements in the region. Studies by Barry et al. (2024) and Mungwini (2026) highlight the fluidity of gender roles in Indonesian societies, where women often engage in both domestic and market-oriented activities. In maritime communities, Mosuela (2026) and Wang & Parr (2025) documents the critical role of women in sustaining fishing economies, particularly through processing and trading activities. Similarly, Hatzisavvidou (2024) and Pitso (2026) show that women's involvement in small-scale fisheries in Indonesia is essential for household income diversification and food security. These studies collectively suggest that women's economic participation is not peripheral but central to the functioning of local economies.

Beyond Indonesia, comparative studies from other parts of the Global South reinforce this perspective. Chun et al. (2026) and Fatima & Batta (2025) demonstrates how women's contributions to agricultural production in South Asia challenge assumptions of male dominance in rural economies. Higgins-Desbiolles (2022) and Theocharis (2026) critiques the "feminization of poverty" thesis by showing that women's economic roles are often more complex and context-dependent than commonly portrayed. In African contexts, scholars such as Brocco et al. (2025) and Datta et al. (2024) have similarly argued for a more nuanced understanding of gendered labor that accounts for social relations and institutional arrangements. Together, these works point toward a broader shift in gender studies, from viewing women as passive victims of structure to recognizing them as active participants in shaping their social worlds.

However, despite these advances, there remains a tendency in the literature to frame women's agency primarily in terms of resistance to patriarchy or access to formal economic opportunities. Less attention has been paid to forms of agency that are embedded within existing social structures and expressed through everyday practices of cooperation, obligation, and mutual support. In particular, island and maritime societies—despite their strategic importance and distinctive socio-economic configurations—are still underrepresented in global sociological debates. This relative absence has limited the development of theoretical frameworks that can adequately account for the relational and context-specific nature of gender roles in such settings.

It is within this intellectual landscape that the present study positions itself, seeking to bring into focus a form of women's agency that does not easily conform to dominant analytical categories yet is deeply consequential for both household and community life. By examining the lived experiences of women in Nolloth Village, this research engages with the subtle and often overlooked ways in which agency is enacted, negotiated, and recognized within family-based livelihood systems. What emerges from this inquiry is not a rejection of existing theories but an invitation to rethink and expand them, allowing for a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of gender in the Global South.

The study thus aims to critically reassess the construction of gender roles through an empirically grounded analysis of everyday practices, to identify the forms of agency that are integrated within local systems of production and social organization, and to contribute to the development of a conceptual framework that better reflects the realities of island communities. In doing so, it aligns with broader efforts to decolonize social theory by foregrounding local knowledge and experience as legitimate sources of insight. Ultimately, this research seeks not only to document a particular case but also to participate in an ongoing conversation about how sociology can become more responsive to the diversity of human life across different cultural and geographical contexts.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an intrinsic case study approach, as the primary objective is not to generalize across contexts but to understand in depth the lived experiences and meanings of women's roles within a specific socio-cultural setting. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this research because the notion of agency explored here is relational, context-dependent, and often embedded in everyday practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators (Cameron et al., 2025; Chahbane & Houssaini, 2025; Ferretti, 2025). Rather than treating agency as a measurable variable, this study seeks to interpret how it is enacted, perceived, and negotiated within family and livelihood systems. The intrinsic case study design allows the researcher to focus closely on Nolloth Village as a unique and information-rich site, where the interplay between gender roles, kinship structures, and subsistence economies is especially pronounced (Chapola et al., 2025; Kočović De Santo, 2026; Parr et al., 2024).

Nolloth Village was deliberately selected due to its socio-economic characteristics as a small island community in Eastern Indonesia, where fisheries and subsistence agriculture constitute the backbone of local livelihoods. In such contexts, family-based production systems are highly visible, and the boundaries between domestic and economic spheres are fluid. Preliminary observations and prior regional studies suggest that women in this village are actively involved in multiple stages of economic production, making it a relevant site to examine forms of agency that may not align with dominant theoretical assumptions. The selection of this location is therefore not incidental but grounded in its potential to illuminate underexplored dimensions of gender relations in maritime societies.

The study involved a total of 20 informants, selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who are directly engaged in household and livelihood activities. The informants consisted of 12 women and 8 men from fishing and farming households, representing different age groups, marital statuses, and economic roles within the community. Women were prioritized as primary informants because the study centers on their experiences and perspectives; however, men were also included to provide a more

comprehensive understanding of household dynamics and gender relations. Additional key informants, such as community elders and local leaders, were engaged to provide contextual insights into social norms and historical changes in labor division. The selection of these informants was guided by their experiential knowledge and their ability to articulate the everyday practices that constitute family-based economic systems (Alqaisiya, 2023; Constantinou et al., 2025).

Data collection was conducted through a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of daily activities. In-depth interviews were chosen to allow informants to express their experiences, interpretations, and meanings in their own words, thereby capturing the subjective dimensions of agency (Allais, 2023; Nachman, 2025; Plange, 2025). These interviews were semi-structured, enabling flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining a consistent focus on key research questions. Participant observation was carried out over an extended period, during which the researcher engaged with daily routines such as fish processing, market transactions, and agricultural work. This method was essential for understanding practices that are often taken for granted and may not be fully articulated in interviews (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2025; Haqpana & Tsouroufli, 2023; Tordjmann & Cook, 2026; Trandafoiu, 2026). Field notes and visual documentation were used to record these observations, providing a rich empirical basis for analysis. To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, triangulation was employed at multiple levels. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from different informants and across different social roles, ensuring that interpretations were not based on a single perspective. Methodological triangulation involved cross-checking data from interviews, observations, and documentation to identify consistencies and discrepancies (Harrill et al., 2025; Zembylas, 2025a).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Reframing Gender Roles in Island Societies: Beyond the Marginalization Narrative

The empirical findings from Nolloth Village invite a careful reconsideration of how gender roles are conceptualized, particularly in relation to the widely circulated narrative that positions women as structurally marginalized and confined to domestic spheres. Rather than dismissing this narrative outright, the data suggest that its analytical reach is uneven, especially when applied to small-scale island societies where economic life is organized through family-based and relational systems. In Nolloth, women are not peripheral actors in household economies; they are deeply embedded within them. Daily observations and interviews reveal that women move fluidly between what is conventionally categorized as “domestic” and “productive” work, rendering such distinctions analytically insufficient. As one informant, identified as M.L., explained during an in-depth interview, “we do not separate work like that; everything we do is for the family, whether at home or outside.” This statement captures a broader pattern in which economic contribution is not measured by spatial location but by its role in sustaining collective

life.

The organization of labor in Nolloth reflects a system that is less hierarchical than relational. Men and women engage in different, yet interdependent, activities that together ensure household survival. For instance, while men are primarily responsible for fishing at sea, women take charge of processing, preserving, and marketing the catch. These roles are not perceived locally as unequal but as complementary. Participant observation during fish processing activities showed that women not only manage the technical aspects of drying and preparing fish but also make decisions regarding pricing, timing of sales, and distribution channels. In several instances, women negotiated directly with buyers in local markets, demonstrating both economic competence and social authority. Another informant, S.T., noted that “if we do not manage the sales properly, the family will suffer,” indicating a clear awareness of their strategic role in household sustainability.

Such findings complicate the assumption that economic visibility is synonymous with empowerment, or conversely, that domestic association implies marginalization. In Nolloth, the household itself functions as a central unit of production, where economic and social roles are intertwined. This aligns with Creed et al. (2025) argument that in many non-capitalist or semi-subsistence economies, the household cannot be reduced to a site of consumption but must be understood as a locus of production and social reproduction. Women’s contributions, therefore, are not supplementary but constitutive of the economic system. Importantly, these contributions are recognized within the community, even if they are not formalized in institutional or monetary terms.

From a theoretical standpoint, these observations resonate with recent developments in decolonial feminist thought, which call for a re-centering of local epistemologies in understanding gender relations. Loi et al. (2026) and Prehn et al. (2025) emphasizes that gender itself is a colonial construct that has been universalized through Western frameworks, often obscuring alternative configurations of social life. In this sense, applying a singular model of marginalization risks reproducing the very epistemic hierarchies that decolonial approaches seek to dismantle. Similarly, Abdullah & Hassan (2025) and Elliott et al. (2024) argue that gender-transformative analysis must move beyond predefined categories and instead engage with the lived realities of communities, recognizing that change and agency can take multiple forms depending on context.

What emerges from Nolloth is not a denial of gender differentiation, but a reconfiguration of how such differentiation is valued and enacted. Women’s roles are neither hidden nor devalued; they are integrated into a system of shared responsibility that prioritizes collective well-being over individual recognition. This does not imply the absence of power dynamics, but rather suggests that power operates in ways that are not always visible through conventional analytical lenses. Decision-making processes within households, for example, often involve consultation and mutual agreement, with women’s voices carrying significant weight, particularly in matters related to household expenditure and resource allocation. As reflected in an interview

with R.K., a male informant, “we always discuss together, especially about money and selling fish, because women understand the market better.”

These patterns indicate that the category of “marginalization” may not adequately capture the complexity of gender relations in contexts like Nolloth. Instead, what is observed is a form of embedded participation, where women’s roles are integral to the functioning of both family and economy. This challenges the tendency in mainstream gender studies to equate agency with resistance or departure from traditional roles. In Nolloth, agency is exercised within existing structures, not necessarily against them. It is relational, situated, and deeply connected to everyday practices that sustain life.

### **Women in the Fisheries Economy: Invisible Backbone of Household Sustainability**

The fisheries sector in Nolloth Village constitutes the central axis of household economies, and within this system, women emerge as indispensable yet often under-recognized actors whose contributions extend far beyond auxiliary support. Field data gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews reveal that women are deeply involved in the entire post-harvest chain, encompassing processing, preservation, distribution, and market exchange. These activities are not peripheral tasks but form the backbone of how marine resources are transformed into economic value. After fish are landed by men, women immediately take over responsibility for cleaning, salting, drying, or smoking the catch—processes that require both technical knowledge and experiential skill. As observed during fieldwork, these practices are not only routine but highly coordinated, often involving collective labor among women within kinship networks.

What becomes particularly significant is that women’s involvement does not end at processing. They are also central actors in determining how and when fish enter local markets. In several observed cases, women organized the transportation of processed fish to nearby trading points, negotiated prices with buyers, and managed the circulation of goods across informal market networks. An informant identified as H.R. explained that “if we sell too quickly, the price is low, but if we wait and manage the stock, we can earn more.” This statement reflects a nuanced understanding of market dynamics, suggesting that women are not merely participants but strategic decision-makers in the economic lifecycle of fisheries. Another informant, N.S., emphasized that income from fish sales is often handled by women because “they know how to divide it for daily needs, school, and savings,” indicating that financial management is closely tied to women’s roles in distribution.

This positioning situates women at a critical intersection between production and circulation, where economic value is not only realized but also negotiated. Their control over distribution channels effectively grants them influence over household income flows, even if such influence is not formally recognized as authority. Rather than being framed in terms of explicit power or leadership, this influence is embedded in everyday practices of managing resources, making decisions about timing and pricing, and maintaining relationships with buyers and

traders. In this sense, women's economic roles operate through what might be described as practical authority—grounded in competence, trust, and continuity—rather than institutionalized forms of control.

These findings resonate strongly with contemporary developments in feminist political economy, which have increasingly shifted attention toward informal economies and household-based production systems as critical sites of analysis. Somerville & Munguambe (2021) and Thomas (2023) argues that economic processes in many parts of the Global South cannot be adequately understood through formal sector frameworks alone, as they are deeply embedded in social relations and everyday practices. In Nolloth, the fisheries economy exemplifies this embeddedness: transactions are often negotiated through interpersonal trust, kinship ties, and repeated interactions, rather than through formal contracts or market institutions. Women, by virtue of their consistent engagement in these networks, become key nodes in sustaining both economic and social continuity.

Moreover, the invisibility of women's contributions in conventional economic metrics does not diminish their substantive importance. On the contrary, it highlights a persistent analytical gap in how value is recognized and measured. As Halvorsen & Zaragocin's (2021) and Keet & Rafaely's (2025) and subsequent scholars have noted, much of women's labor in informal and subsistence economies remains undervalued precisely because it does not conform to standardized categories of wage labor or formal employment. In Nolloth, however, local recognition operates differently. Women's roles in managing fish processing and sales are widely acknowledged within the community as essential to household survival. This recognition may not translate into formal status, but it does confer a form of social legitimacy and influence that shapes decision-making processes within families.

Importantly, women themselves do not necessarily interpret their roles through the lens of empowerment or marginalization as defined in external discourses. Instead, their engagement in fisheries is often framed as part of a shared responsibility to sustain the household. As one informant, D.L., expressed, "this is what we do together; if one part stops, everything is affected." This relational framing underscores that economic activity is not individualized but collective, and that women's contributions are integral to the functioning of the whole system. It also suggests that agency, in this context, is not about stepping outside traditional roles but about actively shaping them from within.

### **Beyond Domesticity: Women's Integral Roles in Subsistence Agriculture**

The dynamics observed in the fisheries sector find a parallel—and in many ways a deeper articulation—in the domain of subsistence agriculture, where women's roles are not only extensive but woven seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life. In Nolloth Village, agricultural activities are organized around small-scale, family-managed plots that function as both sources of food and sites of social interaction. Within this system, women are involved across the entire cycle of production, from land preparation and planting to maintenance and harvesting. Field

observations show that women participate in clearing plots, selecting seeds, planting root crops, and managing mixed gardens that include cassava, vegetables, and perennial crops. These activities are often carried out in coordination with other household members, yet women frequently assume responsibility for ensuring continuity and care in the cultivation process.

What distinguishes women's engagement in subsistence agriculture is not only its breadth but its simultaneity with other responsibilities that are conventionally categorized as domestic. During fieldwork, it was common to observe women tending to crops while also supervising children, preparing food, or organizing household tasks. Rather than occurring in separate temporal or spatial domains, these activities unfold together in a continuous flow. An informant identified as Y.P. described this integration succinctly: "we go to the garden in the morning, but we also bring food, sometimes children come along, and we return to cook and continue working again." This pattern suggests that the division between productive and reproductive labor is not a lived reality but an analytical construct that fails to capture the rhythm of daily life in such contexts.

The absence of a rigid boundary between domestic and economic spheres challenges one of the most enduring dichotomies in gender studies. Conventional frameworks often distinguish between productive labor, associated with income generation and public space, and reproductive labor, linked to care, maintenance, and the private domain. However, in Nolloth, these categories overlap to the extent that separating them becomes conceptually limiting. Women's work in agriculture directly contributes to household sustenance, while their roles in food preparation, childcare, and household management ensure the reproduction of labor capacity and social continuity. Both dimensions are essential and mutually reinforcing. As another informant, M.K., noted, "if we do not plant, we cannot eat; if we do not take care of the house, we cannot work well." This statement underscores the interdependence of activities that are often analytically separated.

This empirical reality resonates with recent developments in care economy and social reproduction theory, which emphasize that economic production cannot be understood independently of the processes that sustain life and labor. Mncube's (2024) and Nyawasha's (2024) argues that social reproduction—including caregiving, food preparation, and the maintenance of households—is foundational to all economic systems, even if it remains undervalued or invisible in dominant economic models. In the context of Nolloth, this insight becomes particularly tangible: subsistence agriculture is not merely an economic activity but part of a broader system of life-making, in which care and production are inseparable. Women's labor, therefore, cannot be categorized as either productive or reproductive; it is simultaneously both.

Moreover, women's involvement in agriculture also carries implications for knowledge transmission and ecological stewardship. Observations indicate that women possess detailed knowledge of planting cycles, soil conditions, and crop diversity, often passed down through generations. This knowledge is not codified in formal systems but embedded in practice and shared through everyday interactions. In this sense, women function as custodians of both food

security and local ecological knowledge. Their decisions about what to plant, when to harvest, and how to manage resources reflect a long-term orientation toward sustainability rather than short-term profit. This further complicates narrow economic definitions of productivity, suggesting that value must also be understood in terms of resilience and continuity.

Importantly, women do not articulate their roles in agriculture as burdens imposed by necessity, but as integral to their identity and responsibility within the family. This does not imply the absence of hardship, but it does indicate that meaning is derived from participation rather than separation. As expressed by informant R.L., “this is how we live; working in the garden and taking care of the family are the same thing.” Such statements point to a moral economy in which labor is embedded in social relations and collective well-being, rather than individualized achievement.

### **Embedded Agency: Rethinking Power, Recognition, and Social Influence**

The empirical material from Nolloth Village points toward a form of agency that is not easily captured by dominant frameworks that equate power with autonomy, resistance, or overt forms of contestation. Instead, what emerges is a more subtle yet pervasive mode of action that is embedded within everyday practices and relational structures. Women’s agency in this context is not articulated through explicit opposition to patriarchal norms, nor through claims of individual independence, but through their continuous involvement in shaping the rhythms of household and community life. This embeddedness does not imply passivity; rather, it reflects a mode of influence that operates through participation, negotiation, and practical engagement within existing social arrangements.

Field interviews consistently reveal that women play a decisive role in household decision-making, particularly in matters related to resource allocation, expenditure, and economic planning. However, these decisions are rarely framed as unilateral acts. Instead, they are often described as outcomes of ongoing discussions between spouses and extended family members. An informant identified as A.S. explained that “before selling fish or using money, we always talk first, because everyone depends on it.” This emphasis on consultation suggests that decision-making authority is distributed rather than centralized, with women’s voices carrying significant weight due to their intimate knowledge of household needs and market conditions. Another informant, J.K., noted that “women usually manage the money because they know what is needed every day,” indicating a form of trust-based delegation that translates into practical control over financial flows.

This pattern of influence extends beyond the household into broader social relations within the community. Women are actively involved in maintaining networks of exchange, cooperation, and mutual support, whether through informal lending, sharing of food resources, or participation in collective activities such as food preparation for communal events. These practices reinforce their position as key actors in sustaining social cohesion. During participant observation, it became evident that women often serve as intermediaries in resolving minor

disputes or coordinating collective labor, roles that require both social skill and moral authority. Such forms of engagement are rarely recognized as “leadership” in formal terms, yet they are crucial for the functioning of community life.

The concept of embedded agency provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. Rather than viewing agency as an attribute possessed by individuals, this perspective understands it as something that is enacted through relationships and situated within specific social contexts. Adefila et al. (2022) and Motala's (2025) relational conception of agency, further elaborated in recent sociological debates, emphasizes that action is always temporally and socially embedded, shaped by past experiences, present interactions, and future orientations. Building on this, Balogun & Woldegiorgis's (2025) and McQuaid & Pirmasari's (2023) argues that agency must be understood within networks of social relations, where individuals are both enabled and constrained by their positions within these networks. In Nolloth, women's agency is clearly relational in this sense: it is constituted through their roles as mothers, spouses, economic actors, and community members, and it gains efficacy through the trust and recognition they accumulate over time.

What is particularly striking is that women themselves do not necessarily interpret their influence in terms of “power” as it is commonly defined in Western social theory. There is little emphasis on control, domination, or individual achievement. Instead, their actions are framed in terms of responsibility, care, and contribution to collective well-being. As one informant, L.M., expressed, “we do what is needed so that the family can continue.” This orientation reflects a moral economy in which value is placed on sustaining relationships and ensuring continuity, rather than asserting individual authority. Yet, within this framework, women are far from powerless. Their ability to influence decisions, manage resources, and maintain social networks constitutes a form of practical power that is both effective and socially recognized, even if it remains understated.

This challenges the analytical tendency to equate agency with resistance or transformation in a confrontational sense. In many gender studies frameworks, agency is identified through acts that disrupt or challenge existing structures. While such forms of action are undoubtedly important, they do not exhaust the range of ways in which individuals shape their social worlds. In Nolloth, agency is exercised through continuity as much as change, through working within structures rather than against them. This does not mean that these structures are static or unproblematic, but rather that they are continuously reproduced and subtly reshaped through everyday practices.

By foregrounding embedded agency, this study contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to reconceptualize power and action in more relational and context-sensitive terms. It suggests that influence can be diffuse, negotiated, and grounded in practice, rather than concentrated and formally articulated. In doing so, it opens up space for recognizing forms of agency that have often been overlooked because they do not fit dominant theoretical expectations. The case of Nolloth thus illustrates that understanding gender and power in the

Global South requires not only new empirical attention but also a willingness to rethink the conceptual tools through which these phenomena are interpreted.

### **Fluid Boundaries: Deconstructing the Public–Domestic Divide**

The empirical realities observed in Nolloth Village challenge one of the most enduring binaries in gender analysis: the distinction between the public and the domestic. Rather than occupying separate and clearly demarcated spheres, these domains appear deeply intertwined in everyday life, with women moving fluidly between them without experiencing the role conflict often assumed in dominant theoretical frameworks. Daily routines documented through participant observation show that activities such as preparing food, caring for children, processing fish, and engaging in market exchange are not sequentially divided but occur in overlapping temporal and spatial rhythms. Women often conduct economic transactions from within or near the household, while domestic responsibilities extend into spaces conventionally labeled as “public,” such as gardens, shorelines, and local markets. This fluidity suggests that the public–domestic divide, as a rigid analytical category, fails to capture the lived organization of social and economic life in this context.

Interviews with informants further illuminate how these boundaries are experienced—or more precisely, not experienced—as separate domains. An informant identified as S.L. described her daily routine as “going to the garden, coming back to cook, then preparing fish to sell, and sometimes meeting buyers at home,” emphasizing that these activities are perceived as part of a continuous flow rather than distinct roles. Another informant, T.R., noted that “the house is not only for resting; it is also where we work, meet people, and manage things,” indicating that the household functions as a central node where multiple forms of activity converge. These accounts reinforce the observation that the household in Nolloth is not a private enclave detached from economic life, but rather a dynamic space where production, exchange, and social reproduction intersect.

This configuration calls into question the assumption that economic participation necessarily requires entry into a separate public sphere. In many Western-derived models, empowerment is often linked to women’s movement out of the home and into formal labor markets. However, in Nolloth, economic engagement is already embedded within the spatial and social structure of the household. Women’s involvement in fish processing, small-scale trading, and agricultural work does not require a departure from domestic space; instead, it redefines that space as economically productive. As such, the household becomes both a site of livelihood generation and a locus of social reproduction, where care, labor, and exchange are co-constituted.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with developments in everyday sociology and practice theory, which shift the focus from abstract structural categories to the routines and practices through which social life is enacted. Hindmarch & Hillier’s (2023) argue that social order is best understood through the analysis of practices—configurations of

materials, meanings, and competences—rather than through fixed institutional boundaries. Applying this lens to Nolloth, it becomes evident that what matters is not whether an activity is labeled as “public” or “domestic,” but how it is performed, by whom, and in what relational context. Women’s practices of cooking, trading, and caregiving are not isolated tasks but interconnected elements of broader systems of livelihood and social organization.

Moreover, the fluidity of these boundaries has implications for how agency and constraint are conceptualized. If the domestic sphere is assumed to be inherently restrictive, then women’s presence within it may be interpreted as a sign of limitation. However, in Nolloth, the domestic sphere is neither static nor confined; it is permeable, adaptive, and actively shaped by those who inhabit it. Women’s ability to transform domestic spaces into sites of economic activity suggests a form of spatial agency that operates through reconfiguration rather than relocation. As one informant, M.S., explained, “we can sell from here, people come to us, or we go to them; it depends on the situation,” highlighting a pragmatic flexibility in navigating different spaces.

At the same time, it is important not to romanticize this fluidity as the absence of constraints. Women still carry a significant share of responsibility for both care and economic work, and the integration of these roles can result in long and demanding workdays. However, what is analytically significant is that these responsibilities are not experienced as belonging to separate spheres but as part of a unified system of obligations and contributions. This challenges the notion that role multiplicity necessarily leads to role conflict; instead, it may reflect a different organization of time, space, and value.

### **Toward a Contextual and Decolonial Framework of Gender in the Global South**

The empirical insights generated from Nolloth Village, when read collectively, point toward the need for a broader rethinking of how gender, work, and agency are conceptualized within the Global South. Rather than presenting an isolated case, the findings reveal patterns that challenge the epistemological foundations of dominant gender theories, particularly their reliance on universal categories such as marginalization, public–domestic separation, and individualistic notions of agency. What emerges instead is a social configuration in which women’s roles are deeply embedded within relational systems of family, economy, and community, and where meaning is derived not from separation but from integration. This invites a shift from applying pre-existing theoretical frameworks toward generating concepts that are grounded in the lived realities of specific contexts.

The experiences of women in Nolloth suggest that gender cannot be adequately understood without attending to the socio-material conditions in which it is enacted. In this village, economic life is organized through small-scale fisheries and subsistence agriculture, both of which rely heavily on cooperation within households. Within such systems, women’s contributions are not supplementary but foundational, spanning production, distribution, and social reproduction. Yet, these contributions are not articulated through the language of empowerment or resistance that dominates much of global gender discourse. As one informant,

identified as E.P., reflected, “we do not think about power; we think about how to keep the family going.” This statement captures a different orientation toward action—one that is collective, pragmatic, and oriented toward continuity rather than transformation in a confrontational sense.

This orientation calls into question the universality of analytical categories that have been largely shaped by Euro-American experiences. Manley & Pule's (2025) and Türk & Jongerden's (2024) has long argued for the importance of “Southern theory” in rebalancing global knowledge production, emphasizing that insights from the Global South should not merely serve as empirical illustrations but as sources of theoretical innovation. More recent decolonial scholarship extends this argument by highlighting how dominant frameworks often obscure alternative ways of organizing social life (Herrick & Bell, 2022; Pappé et al., 2024; Satsangi, 2026). In the case of Nolloth, the assumption that agency must manifest as resistance to patriarchal structures becomes less tenable when women’s influence is exercised through embedded participation in those very structures. Similarly, the dichotomy between productive and reproductive labor loses its explanatory power when both are performed simultaneously and are equally essential to survival.

What the findings suggest, therefore, is not the absence of gendered differentiation or inequality, but the presence of a different logic through which these are organized and experienced. Women’s agency in Nolloth is not external to social structures but internal to them, operating through everyday practices of decision-making, resource management, and social coordination. This form of agency is relational in nature, shaped by interactions within households and communities, and sustained through recognition that is often informal but nonetheless meaningful. As discussed in contemporary relational sociology, agency is not a fixed attribute of individuals but an emergent property of social relations (Kvangraven & Kesar, 2023; Zembylas, 2025b). The case of Nolloth provides a concrete illustration of this perspective, showing how influence is distributed, negotiated, and enacted within networks of interdependence.

At the same time, the empirical material underscores the importance of taking seriously the spatial and cultural specificity of island societies, which have historically been underrepresented in sociological theory. The integration of economic and domestic activities within the household, the reliance on informal market networks, and the centrality of kinship relations all point to a mode of social organization that differs from industrial or urban settings where many dominant theories were developed. As such, the experiences of Nolloth are not anomalies to be explained away, but indicative of broader patterns that require theoretical attention. Recognizing this opens up the possibility of developing more context-sensitive frameworks that are better attuned to the diversity of social life across the Global South.

Within this context, the notion of embedded agency—while emerging from empirical observation—also begins to take on a conceptual significance. It offers a way of understanding action that does not depend on separation from structure, but on engagement within it. It shifts the analytical focus from whether women are constrained or free, to how they navigate,

negotiate, and shape the conditions of their lives through everyday practices. This does not negate the existence of structural inequalities, but it complicates how they are interpreted and addressed. By foregrounding embeddedness, the analysis moves toward a more nuanced understanding of power as something that is enacted through relationships, rather than possessed as a resource.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the construction of gender roles in Nolloth Village cannot be adequately understood through dominant frameworks that presuppose women's marginalization or confinement within domestic spaces. Instead, the findings reveal that women's roles are inherently embedded within family-based livelihood systems, where economic production, social reproduction, and relational responsibilities are deeply intertwined. In this context, women's agency does not primarily manifest as overt resistance or departure from established structures, but rather through continuous participation in decision-making processes, resource management, and the maintenance of social and economic networks that sustain household life. This form of embedded agency highlights a mode of influence that is relational, context-sensitive, and grounded in everyday practices, thereby challenging rigid dichotomies such as public versus domestic and productive versus reproductive labor. By foregrounding the lived experiences of an island community in the Global South, this study contributes to a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of gender, while also implicitly advancing an alternative conceptual lens that repositions agency as something enacted within, rather than outside of, social structures. In doing so, it underscores the importance of developing gender analyses that are attentive to local epistemologies and socio-economic configurations, without assuming the universal applicability of dominant theoretical categories.

## **ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE**

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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