

Women, Work, and Family: A Sociological Study on Female Income Contribution in Rural Maluku Communities

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze women's economic contribution to household income and the dynamics of their dual roles within rural communities in Maluku, particularly in Sawai Village. Although men are traditionally recognized as primary breadwinners, socio-economic transformations have encouraged women to engage in productive activities such as farming, trading, tailoring, and public employment, yet their contributions remain socially and statistically undervalued. Using a qualitative approach within the framework of economic sociology and gender studies, this research employs in-depth interviews, participant observation, and social documentation, analyzed thematically through categories of economic contribution, domestic roles, social perception, and gender adaptation. The findings reveal that women in Sawai play a significant role in sustaining household economies, contributing an average of 28.38% to total income, with the highest contribution (42.70%) coming from formal employment. These results indicate a shift in the gendered division of labor, as women become integral to household economic structures despite limited social recognition under prevailing patriarchal norms. The study's novelty lies in applying a locally grounded economic sociology perspective to postcolonial rural Maluku, integrating quantitative and qualitative insights. Theoretically, it advances discourse on gendered economic participation, while practically offering policy implications for culturally sensitive women's economic empowerment in Indonesia's eastern rural contexts.

Article Info:

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INTRODUCTION

In rural Indonesian communities, particularly in the eastern regions such as Maluku, the relationship between women, work, and family constitutes a complex and deeply meaningful social field. Tradition, religion, and patriarchal social structures continue to play dominant roles in shaping local perceptions of gender roles (Hidayati & Siregar, 2024; Hukunala et al., 2022). Within traditional perspectives, men are regarded as the primary breadwinners and economic decision-makers, whereas women are positioned in the domestic sphere as homemakers, caregivers, and moral custodians of the family. However, the contemporary socioeconomic reality reveals significant transformation. The rising cost of living, the declining sustainability of agrarian livelihoods, and the limited availability of formal employment opportunities have compelled women to participate more actively in productive

activities to sustain household economies (Adnan & Amri, 2021; Kunjuraman et al., 2022). This development underscores that women's roles can no longer be reduced to domestic functions alone.

In Negeri Sawai, a rural community in Central Maluku, this dynamic is particularly evident. Many women are now engaged in various forms of economic activity, as small-scale traders in local markets, plantation workers, home-based seamstresses, and contract employees in local government offices. Their participation serves as a crucial pillar of household survival, although socially, their contributions often remain underacknowledged. Women are still frequently perceived as merely "helping their husbands" rather than being recognized as equal economic actors (Laskar, 2023; Sunarti & Murwani, 2022). In many cases, however, women's income becomes decisive for the household's financial stability, especially when men's earnings are insufficient. This paradox reflects the tension between economic realities and social norms: women labor intensely in the public sphere, yet their efforts remain constrained by patriarchal cultural boundaries.

This condition makes the study of women's economic contribution in rural Maluku particularly significant. First, it highlights the sociological dimension of household economic transformation, where gender relations and divisions of labor are being renegotiated. Second, Maluku's unique sociocultural characteristics, marked by the interplay of customary values, religion, and kinship systems, mean that women's roles cannot be separated from the local context. Third, the economic contributions of rural women remain underrepresented in official statistics and development discourse, despite their centrality to household sustainability in rural areas.

The sociology of women and work has been a major area of scholarly attention since the 1970s, particularly following the rise of feminist theories that challenged masculine bias in economic and labor analysis. Rosepti and Niasari (2022) explain how capitalist and patriarchal systems intersect to subordinate women within labor structures. Similarly, Li et al. (2024) identify gender-based divisions of labor within households as a form of symbolic exclusion, since domestic work is often regarded as economically unproductive. Extending this discourse, Zega et al. (2024) introduced the concept of women's triple role, reproductive, productive, and social, often overlapping in the daily lives of rural women.

In the Indonesian context, several studies have sought to unpack these dynamics. Research by Redclift and Whatmore (2023) and Wardhani and Susilowati (2021) revealed how rural women in Java utilize the informal sector as a space for both economic and social negotiation amid agrarian transformation. Titaley et al. (2022) highlighted how Indonesian women employ strategies of moral economy to balance family responsibilities and economic needs. In eastern Indonesia, Afdhal (2023) found that women's involvement in household economies is not merely an adaptation to economic pressures but also an expression of social autonomy within the boundaries of customary and religious norms. International literature echoes similar patterns. Marsden et al. (2023), in their comparative study of women in Latin America and Asia, demonstrated that women's economic contributions are often absent from official statistics because much of their work takes place in the informal or unpaid sectors.

Georgios et al. (2021) further emphasized that women's economic empowerment does not necessarily translate into higher social status, as traditional gender norms frequently constrain social recognition. Moreover, Benería, Berik, and Floro (2015) argued that global capitalism has produced new forms of gender inequality, where women face a "double burden" despite rising labor participation.

In Maluku, however, studies on women and household economy remain relatively scarce. Alfons and Frans (2023) and Sahuleka et al. (2025) explored women's roles in small-scale trade and agricultural product management but primarily focused on microeconomic dimensions, with limited attention to sociological and gender negotiation aspects. Afdhal and Kurniawati (2025) demonstrated that Maluku women play strategic roles in sustaining family economies through subsistence agriculture, yet their study did not fully explain how women negotiate their dual roles within a patriarchal social order. Existing literature thus provides an important foundation but has yet to integrate economic participation with the broader sociocultural context of rural Maluku society.

Furthermore, previous research has largely employed developmental economics or liberal feminist frameworks, which tend to focus on income generation and formal labor participation. In contrast, within communities such as Negeri Sawai, women's work extends beyond the economic domain, it embodies social meaning, familial solidarity, and community sustainability. Women's labor forms part of an interdependent social system that connects economy, kinship, and culture. Therefore, a sociological approach that integrates economic and gender perspectives, viewing women as active subjects in social-economic processes, is crucial to filling this analytical gap.

This study thus emerges from the research gap in understanding women's economic contributions in rural Maluku communities, not only as underdocumented phenomena but as socially and culturally negotiated processes. Existing studies often separate economic and social analyses, whereas both dimensions are deeply intertwined in women's everyday lives. This research reexamines how women in Negeri Sawai negotiate their dual roles as household managers and economic actors, constructing new social meanings of labor, responsibility, and selfhood within a changing cultural order.

By employing a combination of qualitative and simple quantitative data anchored in local Maluku contexts, this research not only contributes new empirical insights but also offers an alternative perspective on the interrelations between gender, labor, and household economy in Indonesia's eastern archipelago. The study focuses on how women negotiate their dual productive and domestic roles, interpreting both as integral and meaningful aspects of social life within a patriarchal yet evolving society. The primary objectives of this research are to analyze the forms and levels of women's contributions to household income in Negeri Sawai, identify their labor strategies and time allocation in balancing productive and domestic roles, and understand the sociocultural dynamics shaping their economic participation in rural Maluku. Hence, this study seeks not only to describe social realities but also to expand theoretical horizons on how women in postcolonial eastern Indonesia negotiate economic and social spaces within a transforming cultural order.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, as the phenomena under investigation are closely tied to meaning, lived experience, and social interpretation within the everyday lives of women in Maluku's rural communities. A qualitative design allows for an in-depth understanding of how women interpret their dual roles as household managers and economic actors within a patriarchal social framework. As Kodithuwakku (2022) asserts, qualitative research aims to capture social reality from the participants' perspective rather than merely measuring it numerically. The purpose here is not only to assess the magnitude of women's economic contributions to household income but also to explore how such contributions are perceived, negotiated, and enacted in daily social practice.

The research site, Negeri Sawai in Central Maluku Regency, was selected based on sociological and empirical considerations. Sawai represents a rural community that retains traditional social structures rooted in customary law and religion while simultaneously undergoing significant economic changes due to growing household pressures and occupational diversification. The coexistence of strong customary values and rapid socioeconomic change makes Sawai an ideal context for examining how women adapt to, negotiate, and restructure their roles within an evolving social order. The local economy, comprising plantation work, petty trade, and public-sector employment, also provides a diverse setting for analyzing variations in women's economic participation across different social strata.

The study involved 15 participants, including twelve women actively engaged in household economic activities. They were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in income-generating work: four small-scale traders, three plantation laborers, two home-based seamstresses, and three contract employees in schools or local government offices. The sampling followed the principle of information-rich cases, prioritizing participants with deep experiential knowledge of the phenomenon under study. Additionally, two male community leaders and one village official were interviewed to provide complementary perspectives on social perceptions of women's roles (Renjith et al., 2021).

Data collection was conducted through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and social documentation. In-depth interviews were used to elicit women's personal narratives regarding their work experiences, family dynamics, and strategies for balancing domestic and productive roles. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was recorded with participant consent. This technique enables the revelation of deeper layers of meaning, such as emotions, perceptions, and value systems underlying women's actions (Susanto et al., 2024). Participant observation was carried out over two months, allowing the researcher to engage in everyday community activities such as farming, market interactions, and family gatherings. This immersion helped contextualize women's economic behavior within their broader social relations. Social documentation involved collecting secondary data, including household income records, economic activity archives, and photographic evidence of daily work routines.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the stages of data organization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation (Maxwell & Levitt, 2023). Interview and observation data were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring patterns related to economic contribution, domestic role, social perception, and gender adaptation strategies. Each theme was then linked to theoretical perspectives from economic sociology and gender studies to develop a contextualized interpretation of women's social realities in Negeri Sawai.

To ensure validity and credibility, three forms of triangulation were applied: source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data across various informants, women, husbands, and community figures, to check information consistency. Methodological triangulation compared interview findings with participant observations to substantiate narrative data through lived practices. Theoretical triangulation involved contrasting empirical findings with theories on gendered division of labor and family economic sociology. Through this process, the analysis not only describes social facts but also interprets their meanings within a broader theoretical framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women and the Socio-Economic Landscape of Negeri Sawai

This section introduces the socio-economic landscape of Negeri Sawai as the primary setting for understanding women's work dynamics. Located along the northern coast of Seram Island, Negeri Sawai exemplifies the distinctive characteristics of rural Maluku society, religious, communal, and deeply rooted in customary values. Within such a social order, men traditionally occupy the role of head of the household and principal breadwinner, while women are expected to remain within the domestic sphere. However, amid increasing economic pressures, caused by limited resources, fluctuating marine yields, and the growing influence of public-sector employment, the boundary between domestic and productive domains has begun to blur. Field observations reveal that mornings in Sawai are filled with women's activity: preparing breakfast, taking children to school, and rushing to gardens, markets, or workplaces. These daily routines vividly demonstrate that women's roles have expanded well beyond traditional domestic boundaries.

In the lens of economic sociology, this phenomenon can be understood through Granovetter's (2018) concept of embeddedness, which asserts that economic actions are never autonomous but are instead embedded within the social, cultural, and moral fabric of society. Beckert (2021) further emphasizes that local economies are shaped by values and norms that lend meaning to production and consumption activities. Accordingly, women's labor in Sawai is not merely an economic act of rational income generation but a morally recognized form of social participation. Women who work are often regarded as dutiful and devoted family members, even though, paradoxically, their contributions are still socially framed as "helping the husband" rather than as independent economic actors.

The social structure of Sawai reflects multilayered gender relations. In interviews, informants such as Mrs. R and Mrs. M explained that “the husband is supposed to provide, but when the sea yields are poor, we women must help, otherwise the children can’t go to school.” Such statements capture the tension between the acknowledgment of patriarchal norms and women’s everyday negotiation of these norms through economic practices. Field observations show that women are deeply engaged in small-scale trade, fish smoking, tailoring, and honorary employment at local schools. They begin their economic activities early in the morning and continue until late afternoon, interspersed with unceasing domestic responsibilities.

Empirical data reveal that the primary reason women in Sawai engage in economic activities is household financial instability, particularly among families dependent on fishing. Approximately 85% of women work due to insufficient family income, and around 80% are motivated by the high number of dependents. In the Sawai market, most vegetable and cake vendors are women. They manage their goods carefully, share customers, and often remind each other about prices and stock levels, an expression of gender-based economic solidarity in which female labor is guided not only by profit motives but also by mutual trust and moral support.

Beyond economic motivation, women’s work carries a strong social and symbolic dimension. Many view work as a means to enhance their self-worth and social standing. One informant remarked, “If we can earn our own money, our husbands respect us more, we can speak up about the children’s needs.” This statement reveals how economic participation becomes a medium of domestic power negotiation. By earning an income, women not only sustain household economies but also gain influence in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, social recognition of their productive role remains limited, as cultural expectations continue to position women primarily as homemakers.

Field observations indicate that most women in Sawai maintain exceptionally long working hours, averaging 17.22 hours per day, 10.72 hours for domestic labor and 5.95 hours for economic activity. Despite the heavy workload, they rarely express complaint, perceiving it instead as an expression of familial responsibility. It is common to see women washing clothes by the river after returning from the garden or preparing goods for sale late at night after the family rests. This pattern illustrates how domestic and productive roles are seamlessly integrated into a single rhythm of everyday life.

Data from table 1 demonstrates a clear pattern of the double burden, a workload unacknowledged in formal structures yet fundamental to household economic sustainability. From Beckert’s (2021) perspective of moral embeddedness, such labor embodies the intertwining of economic action with moral and social obligations. Women work not merely for rational economic gain but out of moral commitment to family honor and the survival of their children.

Tabel 1 Women's Time Allocation for Economic and Non-Economic Activities

No	Waking up and preparing the house	(04:30–05:20) 50 minutes	(04:00–05:15) 75 minutes
1	Preparing breakfast and leaving for work	(05:20–08:00) 160 minutes	(05:15–07:00) 105 minutes
2	Working or engaging in social activities	(08:00–09:20) 80 minutes	(07:00–12:00) 300 minutes
3	Resting and preparing lunch	(09:20–12:25) 125 minutes	(12:00–14:30) 150 minutes
4	Returning to work	–	(14:30–18:30) 240 minutes
5	Coming home, resting, cleaning the house	(12:25–18:45) 380 minutes	(18:30–20:00) 90 minutes
6	Dinner and family interaction	(18:45–21:00) 135 minutes	(20:00–21:00) 60 minutes
7	Preparing for night rest	(21:00–04:30)	(21:00–04:00)
8	Waking up and preparing the house	(04:30–05:20) 50 minutes	(04:00–05:15) 75 minutes

(Source: Field observations and interviews, 2025)

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Ethnographic observation further reveals that customary and religious norms continue to influence gendered divisions of labor. Women who are too publicly visible in economic activities may be labeled as "improper," yet the community simultaneously depends on their productivity. Churches and local women's organizations, such as PKK, thus become hybrid spaces, teaching domestic virtue while enabling women to expand their social and economic networks (Tasane & Manuputty, 2024; Tomay & Tuboly, 2023).

Sociologically, this reflects a subtle transformation within the gendered division of labor framed by local culture. Women in Sawai are no longer merely "helping their husbands," but rather serve as integral actors within household economic systems. However, their contributions remain hidden beneath moral and cultural narratives of devotion. Hence, the household economy in Sawai functions as a site of ongoing social negotiation, where women, through their labor and perseverance, inscribe new meanings into the intertwined networks of economy and society.

Forms and Levels of Women's Economic Contribution to Household Income

Women's economic contribution to household income in Negeri Sawai reveals how female labor, both formal and informal, constitutes a structural component of family economies. The study found that women's income contributes an average of 28.38% to total

household earnings, with the highest share (42.70%) coming from those employed as civil servants or honorary workers. These figures indicate that, although women are often portrayed as “helpers” in social discourse, they are empirically indispensable to household economic sustainability. As Buttel and LaRamee (2021) and Sowl et al. (2022) argue, gendered divisions of labor are not natural but socially constructed, reflecting power, norms, and cultural hierarchies. Similarly, Marsden et al. (2023) highlight how household economies often obscure women’s productive labor behind domesticity, despite its substantial economic value.

Field data from Sawai show that women’s economic activities span two main domains: on-farm (agriculture) and non-farm (trading, tailoring, and formal employment). In agricultural work, women participate directly in the harvest of cloves and nutmeg, key commodities in Sawai, often under traditional 50:50 profit-sharing arrangements with their husbands or relatives. On average, women spend about IDR 3,387,000 per harvest season on agricultural production costs, primarily for hired labor and transportation to Masohi, the nearest urban market. For non-farm activities, monthly expenses average IDR 1,612,481, mainly for purchasing goods and transport.

Tabel 2 Production and Total Costs of Women’s Economic Activities in Negeri Sawai

Type of Cost	On-Farm Economic Activities	Non-Farm Economic Activities
Fixed Cost	102,000	211,706
Variable Cost	3,285,000	1,400,775
Total Cost	3,387,000	1,612,481

Source: Field observations and interviews, 2025

Women’s economic participation in Sawai is not confined to formal economic logic but is deeply embedded in systems of reciprocity and trust. In the village market, for instance, vendors often lend goods to one another when capital is short, under informal agreements based on social closeness. This supports Granovetter’s (2018) notion of social embeddedness, where moral and relational trust underpins economic exchange.

The average monthly income of women in Sawai is IDR 4,948,437, with the highest from salaried workers (IDR 2,700,000), followed by trade and tailoring (IDR 1,540,436), and the lowest from agriculture (IDR 441,334 per harvest). Some honorary workers earn only IDR 266,667 monthly. Yet, as one informant, Mrs. L, explained, “Even though the salary is small, I still work because it helps buy rice each month.” Her words reveal that the meaning of work transcends income, it is tied to social value and household continuity.

Women traders and tailors in Sawai employ adaptive strategies in managing their livelihoods. They travel weekly to Masohi to purchase supplies, selling them from home or small kiosks that double as social hubs. While female civil servants receive stable wages and higher social recognition, traders and farmers possess greater time flexibility and play a crucial role in maintaining household resilience during economic downturns.

Tabel 3 Women's Income in Negeri Sawai

Economic Activity	Average Revenue (Rp)	Cost (Rp)	Income (Rp)
On-farm: Farming	733,917	292,583	441,334
Non-farm: Trade & Sewing Services	3,152,917	1,612,481	1,540,436
Civil Servant	2,700,000	–	2,700,000
Contract Employee	266,667	–	266,667
Total	6,853,501	1,905,604	4,948,437

Source: Field observations and interviews, 2025

Overall, women contribute 28.38% of total household income, compared to 48.64% from husbands and 22.98% from children's part-time work. Despite this substantial share, women's contributions often remain undervalued. As one respondent, Mrs. N, noted, "Money from the wife is still considered just to help, it's never counted the same as the husband's income." This reflects a persistent gendered ideology that positions women's labor as subordinate despite its economic necessity.

Tabel 4 Women's Contribution to Household Income

Source of Income	Amount (Rp)	Contribution (%)
Husband	3,075,000	48.64
Wife	1,794,179	28.38
Children	1,453,000	22.98
Total	6,322,179	100.00

Source: Field observations and interviews, 2025

From an economic sociology perspective, these figures illustrate the tension between patriarchal symbolic structures and emerging economic realities. Georgios et al. (2021) and Redclift and Whatmore (2023) argue that gendered labor division functions as a contested power arena. When women enter the public sphere and contribute significantly to household income, they do not merely supplement earnings, they challenge the masculine monopoly of economic authority. Yet, in Sawai, such change remains largely symbolic: women's work is tolerated out of economic necessity, not recognized as gender equality.

Field observations also reveal that women experience a persistent double burden, managing both paid labor and full domestic responsibilities with minimal male support. Similar findings by Has et al. (2022), Litaay and Batjo (2024), and Susilowati and Mafruhah (2023) indicate that women's economic participation often operates under the logic of a "moral family economy," where labor is valued through devotion rather than productivity. In practice, Sawai women work tirelessly from dawn to night, fusing domestic and productive labor into an almost uninterrupted rhythm.

Sociologically, women's contributions to household economies in Negeri Sawai should therefore be interpreted not solely in quantitative terms but also as processes of meaning-making and social negotiation. As Dadi (2021) and Mormont (2023) observe, women continuously balance economic needs with cultural expectations, negotiating their identities as both workers and homemakers. This represents a subtle yet profound transformation in

Maluku's rural gender structures, where women serve as bridges between traditional and modern economic worlds.

Dual Role Negotiation: Between Domestic and Productive Spheres

The negotiation of dual roles between the domestic and productive spheres represents one of the most prominent social phenomena in the lives of women in Negeri Sawai. In their daily routines, women must navigate two often conflicting worlds: the productive world of farming, trading, or formal employment, and the domestic world filled with household responsibilities, caregiving, and maintaining familial harmony. Within this context, the work–family negotiation theory, as developed by Buvinic et al. (2022) and Tomay and Tuboly (2023), is relevant for understanding how women strive to balance structural pressures and social expectations through adaptive and reflective strategies. For Sawai women, this negotiation is not merely a matter of time management but also of preserving moral values and social legitimacy as “good mothers” within a culture still rooted in patriarchal norms.

Field interviews and observations reveal that most women in Sawai begin their day around five in the morning. Domestic activities such as preparing breakfast, cleaning the house, and getting children ready for school follow a nearly uniform rhythm across households. Once domestic tasks are completed, they transition to productive activities such as gardening, sewing, or selling goods at small markets near the port. One informant, Mrs. M, described her pragmatic awareness of this daily rhythm: “If I don’t start early, the housework won’t be done, but by seven I have to be at the garden or the shop.” This simple statement encapsulates the intense temporal discipline these women experience and highlights the importance of time management as a form of everyday negotiation.

Field observations show that houses in Sawai often serve dual functions, as domestic spaces and as sites of economic activity. Many women sew in living rooms that also function as study areas for children, while others run small convenience shops from their front porches. These practices blur the boundaries between public and private spaces. The domestic sphere, once a symbol of women’s subordination, now emerges as a productive space sustaining household economies. This phenomenon illustrates a creative adaptation to social and economic conditions that demand high flexibility.

Women’s negotiation strategies extend beyond time management to include the redistribution of roles within families. Some women reported that their husbands have begun to assist with light domestic tasks, such as taking children to school or shopping for groceries. However, this support is often framed as “helping” rather than sharing responsibilities equally. As one informant, Mrs. R, explained, although her husband allows her to trade, she still ensures the house is tidy before leaving, “So my husband won’t be embarrassed if guests come.” This statement reflects the enduring social ambivalence: women are permitted to work, yet they must preserve their moral domestic image.

Family relationships also play a crucial role in the negotiation of dual roles. Teenage children often assist their mothers in gardens or shops, particularly during the clove harvest or peak trading periods. This involvement represents not only economic participation but also

social learning about labor and responsibility. From a sociological perspective, this pattern suggests that women's labor contributes to shaping the work ethic of younger generations who perceive household economy as a collective endeavor rather than solely the man's responsibility.

Beneath this apparent harmony, however, emotional tensions often surface. Many women feel torn between two moral imperatives: being ideal wives and mothers while remaining productive economic actors. One informant, Mrs. L, a district office employee, expressed her dilemma: despite being the family's primary breadwinner, she often feels guilty for not having lunch with her children. "Sometimes I come home late, and the house isn't cleaned. But I know if I don't work, my kids can't go to school," she said tearfully. This dilemma illustrates what Buttel and LaRamee (2021) and Hermawati et al. (2023) describe as the moral economy of gendered labor, a continuous negotiation between women's moral responsibilities to family and the material needs that compel their participation in the labor force.

Socially, the community's perception of working women in Sawai remains ambivalent. Younger generations increasingly view women as equal economic partners, while older generations still frame women's productive roles as "additional" rather than essential. In informal conversations at local coffee stalls, some men acknowledged that their wives' incomes are often more stable, particularly among traders or public employees, yet they continue to assert that "the main responsibility remains with men." This attitude sustains the symbolic figure of the "male breadwinner," which functions culturally as a pillar of masculinity amid changing local economic realities.

The dual role negotiation also affects household welfare. Many families have improved their living standards thanks to women's productive work, especially in children's education and daily consumption. Nevertheless, this economic advancement does not always translate into social recognition. Women's productive labor often remains "invisible" in formal statistics and symbolically undervalued. As argued by Hyunanda et al. (2021), Siregar et al. (2025), and Wagana (2024), gender-based labor division is not merely functional but also a manifestation of power structures that define who is recognized as a "real worker."

Social Perceptions and Recognition of Women's Work

In the social landscape of Negeri Sawai, women's labor occupies a paradoxical position: it serves as a cornerstone of household economies yet remains socially constrained within a cultural framework that defines women as complements to men. Although empirical data show that women contribute an average of 28.38% to total household income, with the highest share (42.70%) coming from formal employment, the prevailing narrative still portrays women's labor as "helping the husband" rather than as an autonomous contribution. This phenomenon can be explained through the lens of symbolic interactionism (Ramadhani et al., 2023; Sowl et al., 2022; Zakiyah & Akbar, 2025), which emphasizes that social meaning is not inherent in actions but constructed through symbolic interaction and collective interpretation. In this context, the meaning of "women's work" in Sawai emerges through ongoing negotiation between women's lived experiences and the community's symbolic

norms.

Interviews reveal that many working women feel their contributions are undervalued. Mrs. N, a market trader, stated that although her income is more stable than her husband's seasonal plantation work, society still refers to her as a "diligent wife helping her husband." She finds the term "helping" diminishing, as it obscures the fact that most school and household expenses are funded by her earnings. This narrative reinforces the persistence of the "male breadwinner" symbol as the dominant moral standard for assessing labor and economic responsibility.

Field observations at the Sawai market further confirm that women's labor is highly visible yet socially underrecognized. Women actively arrange goods, interact with customers, and coordinate supplies from Masohi, which requires logistical skill and economic acumen. Nevertheless, in daily conversations, both among men and women, the phrase "helping the husband earn money" remains pervasive. Even within female-dominated spaces, patriarchal symbolic constructions persist. As noted by Afdhal (2025), Ipa et al. (2025), and Salmanu et al. (2023), social symbols act as "interpretive frameworks" that shape how individuals perceive themselves and their actions in the social world.

Tabel 5 Forms of Social Recognition of Women's Work in Negeri Sawai

Type of Work	Dominant Social Perception	Form of Recognition	Field Notes
Civil Servant / Contract Employee	"Modern and educated woman"	Considered a source of family pride	Positive image, but still expected to fulfill domestic duties
Trader / Tailor	"Diligent wife helping her husband"	Limited economic recognition	Often the main financial support of the household
Farmer / Plantation Worker	"Hardworking but women's work"	Seen as complementary to men's labor	Low public recognition
Housewife with small business	"Resourceful in finding extra income"	Viewed as commendable	Not regarded as a productive worker

Source: Field observations and interviews, 2025

The data indicate that the higher the degree of occupational formality, the greater the social recognition women receive. Women working in formal sectors are perceived as "modern," although they remain expected to uphold full domestic responsibilities. Conversely, women in informal sectors, such as trading or farming, experience symbolic devaluation, as their productive labor is often considered an extension of domestic work rather than autonomous economic contribution. These findings align with Georgios et al. (2021), Latuconsina et al. (2023), and Tasane and Manuputty (2024), who observed that women's informal labor tends to be culturally framed as reproductive rather than economically independent.

Social institutions such as customary law and religion further reinforce these symbolic boundaries. In traditional ceremonies, women typically occupy supportive roles, preparing food, managing logistics, or ensuring smooth proceedings, while men dominate the front stage as speakers and decision-makers. Even when women contribute financially, their names are rarely mentioned in public forums. As noted by one local elder, "It is good that women work, but they must remember their place." This statement encapsulates the symbolic mechanism maintaining the divide between public (male) and domestic (female) spheres, sustained by customary and religious authority as moral guardians of the community.

This social structure produces significant psychosocial effects. Many women report experiencing dual fatigue, physical from managing two domains and emotional from unequal recognition. Some even hide portions of their income from their husbands to avoid disrupting perceived masculine authority. As one fabric trader, Mrs. A, confessed, "If he knew I earned more, he might feel ashamed." This illustrates how the symbolic notion of male dignity continues to shape household economic relations, compelling women to negotiate their roles symbolically to maintain social equilibrium.

Nevertheless, among younger generations, symbolic shifts are becoming evident. Educated and professionally active women increasingly reject the term "helping" and instead describe their labor as "working for the family." Many see work as a means of self-actualization rather than mere duty, signaling a symbolic redefinition of women's work as social recognition expands. This redefinition extends into digital spaces, young female traders in Sawai use platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to promote their products, adopting modern business language like "branding" and "customers." These digital practices reflect an emerging symbolic arena that allows women to redefine their work identity beyond patriarchal constraints (Afdhal, 2023; Alfons & Frans, 2023; Marsden et al., 2023).

Gender Adaptation and Structural Shifts in Rural Maluku Households

The shifting gender relations within rural Maluku communities, particularly in Sawai, reflect a subtle yet significant social adaptation to women's expanding economic roles. Despite the persistence of patriarchal norms positioning men as household heads and primary decision-makers, increasing economic pressures have created new spaces for women's participation. However, this transformation unfolds not through confrontation but through adaptive strategies emphasizing social balance and harmony, consistent with the transformative gender relations framework proposed by Li et al. (2024) and Redclift and Whatmore (2023).

Interviews reveal that this shift is driven largely by concrete economic necessity. One respondent, YR, explained that income from farming and smoked fish trading funds her children's education, as her husband's fishing income is irregular. For her, women's work is no longer "additional" but essential for family survival. Yet, the language of "helping the husband" persists, indicating symbolic tension between productive realities and entrenched gender constructions. This reflects what Li et al. (2024) and Redclift and Whatmore (2023) describe as "transformation without conflict", a form of negotiated gender change within traditional structures.

At Sawai's traditional market, the economic heart of the village, these dynamics are visible. Women dominate trade in local produce and smoked fish, often accompanied by children, turning the marketplace into a hybrid domestic-public sphere. This embedded economy demonstrates that women's labor sustains both household and community solidarity. Male respondents, such as HS, increasingly recognize this interdependence: "Now everyone must help, if we rely only on men, it's not enough." This pragmatism signifies an instrumental acceptance (Rosepti & Niasari, 2022; Wardhani & Susilowati, 2021; Zega et al., 2024), where economic necessity relaxes patriarchal rigidity without necessarily dismantling it.

While formal decision-making still largely rests with men, women's growing economic participation has prompted more discussion and shared negotiation within households. The shift toward dialogue itself marks progress toward relational equality. Customary institutions continue to uphold traditional moral boundaries, yet women's collective labor in community rituals and economic exchange now represents a vital axis of rural social cohesion. Among younger generations, education and digital engagement are accelerating a symbolic redefinition of women's labor, from moral duty to social and economic agency (Adnan & Amri, 2021; Kunjuraman et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that women's economic contributions to household livelihoods in Negeri Sawai are not merely supplementary but represent a broader social transformation that redefines the meaning of work, gender, and family within the rural context of Maluku. Through adaptive strategies grounded in both traditional values and modern economic necessity, women have successfully negotiated their dual roles without disrupting existing social harmony. Empirically, women's contributions significantly enhance household economic sustainability, while symbolically, they blur the boundaries between domestic and productive spheres. However, social recognition of women's labor remains constrained by patriarchal cultural constructions that continue to frame women as "helpers" rather than contributors. By integrating economic sociology and gender perspectives within the local island context, this research advances the understanding of gendered economic participation as contextual, relational, and rooted in communal harmony. Theoretically, it affirms that gender transformation in rural settings does not always manifest through resistance to patriarchy but through symbolic negotiation that strengthens women's autonomy within enduring traditional structures.

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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