

Women's Empowerment And Family Economic Resilience: A Case Study Of Rural Communities In Indonesia

Risa Elvia¹, IM. Hambali², M. Ishaq³, Umi Dayati⁴

Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia^{1,2,3,4}

EMAIL correspondence author: risa.elvia.2101419@students.um.ac.id¹, im.hambali.fip@um.ac.id², m.ishaq.fip@um.ac.id³, umi.dayati.fip@um.ac.id⁴

Abstract

Background: Rural women often serve as critical economic actors, yet their roles remain under-recognized in development policies. While global scholarship has highlighted women's empowerment in urban and industrial sectors, limited attention is paid to how rural women's community-based initiatives contribute to sustaining family economies.

Purpose: This study investigates the role of rural women in supporting household economic resilience and explores how empowerment programs and social capital strengthen their contributions.

Method: A qualitative case study was conducted in two rural villages in Indonesia, involving in-depth interviews with 20 women participants, local leaders, and community facilitators, complemented by observations and document analysis.

Results: Findings reveal that rural women play a dual role as income earners and household managers. Empowerment initiatives—such as skills training, microfinance, and cooperative groups—enhance their economic agency. Social capital, particularly trust and reciprocity within women's groups, enables collective strategies for managing household needs and coping with economic shocks. However, structural challenges, including limited market access and gendered cultural expectations, constrain their full potential.

Conclusion: This study contributes to the literature by linking women's empowerment, social capital, and rural economic resilience. Practically, it underscores the importance of community-based interventions and supportive policies that recognize and strengthen women's roles as pillars of the family economy.

Keywords: family economy, rural women, social capital, women empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment has long been recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development. Beyond their traditional roles in household management, women increasingly contribute to economic growth, social stability, and community resilience (Husein et al., 2021). Yet, despite global progress, rural women continue to face structural barriers, including restricted access to markets, limited participation in decision-making, and cultural expectations that confine them to domestic spheres (Lestiyawati, 2023). These challenges underscore the paradox that while rural women are essential to household survival, their contributions often remain undervalued in both policy and scholarship.

In rural contexts, women's roles extend beyond income generation to include maintaining family resilience in times of economic uncertainty (Razak, 2025). Recent studies have highlighted the potential of community-based empowerment programs—such as microfinance, cooperative groups, and skills training—to strengthen women's agency and economic participation (Mukhlis, 2025a). However, much of the literature focuses on urban or industrial sectors, leaving a significant gap in understanding how rural women sustain household economies through both formal interventions and informal social networks.

The concept of social capital provides a useful framework for addressing this gap (Nugroho, 2025). Trust, reciprocity, and collective action within women's groups and local communities can amplify the impact of empowerment initiatives, enabling women to pool resources, share knowledge, and navigate economic shocks (Gulesci et al., 2021). Yet empirical studies that explicitly connect women's empowerment, social capital, and family economic resilience in rural settings remain scarce, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how rural women in Indonesia participate in empowerment programs and mobilize social capital to support household economic resilience (Rachman, 2025). Through a qualitative case study of two villages, the research investigates the interplay between women's agency, community-based interventions, and cultural norms. By situating these findings within broader discussions

on gender and rural development, the study contributes to both theory and practice, offering insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to strengthen women's roles as pillars of family and community economies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's Empowerment and Rural Development

Women's empowerment is broadly defined as the process by which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices and exercise agency in economic, social, and political domains (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). In rural contexts, empowerment often translates into participation in income-generating activities, leadership in community groups, and decision-making within households. Research shows that empowerment not only improves women's individual well-being but also contributes to broader rural development outcomes, including poverty reduction and social cohesion (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). However, scholars note that empowerment in rural areas remains constrained by cultural norms, limited access to markets, and gendered power relations.

Social Capital as a Catalyst of Women's Agency

Social capital—defined as resources embedded in trust, reciprocity, and networks—has been recognized as a critical factor in enabling collective action (Nikmatullah, 2024). Within rural communities, bonding social capital (close ties within groups) fosters solidarity among women, while bridging and linking capital connect them to external actors, markets, and institutions. Recent studies highlight that social capital enhances women's access to resources, strengthens cooperation, and amplifies the effects of empowerment programs (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Yet, insufficient attention has been given to how social capital interacts with cultural and religious values in shaping women's economic participation in rural Southeast Asia.

Women's Role in Sustaining Family Economies

Rural women often play a dual role as income earners and household managers. Their economic activities—ranging from farming and handicrafts to participation in microfinance and cooperatives—are crucial to family survival (Erogul et al., 2019). Beyond direct income, women also sustain family resilience by pooling resources, managing household expenditures, and mobilizing informal support systems during crises. However, gendered expectations often create a “double burden,” where women are expected to contribute economically while also shouldering unpaid domestic labor.

Research Gap and Contribution

Although substantial literature has explored women's empowerment and the role of social capital separately, empirical studies explicitly linking these concepts to family economic resilience in rural Indonesia remain scarce (Amri, 2025). Most prior work emphasizes urban women entrepreneurs, large-scale development projects, or microfinance institutions, overlooking localized, community-based initiatives (Sidiq, 2025). This study addresses this gap by examining how rural women, through empowerment programs and social networks, act as pillars of household economies. In doing so, it contributes to theoretical integration between women's empowerment and social capital frameworks while offering policy-relevant insights into rural development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to capture the complexity of rural women's economic roles and the dynamics of empowerment processes in their communities (Clair, 2003). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of social and cultural contexts that shape women's agency and participation in household economies.

Research Sites and Participants

The research was conducted in two rural villages in East Java, Indonesia, which were purposively selected due to their active women's empowerment programs and strong traditions of community participation. Participants included women engaged in income-generating activities, local leaders, and community

facilitators. In total, 20 women were interviewed, complemented by five village leaders and two empowerment program coordinators, to ensure diverse perspectives on women's roles and community support systems.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using multiple techniques to ensure richness and triangulation:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews with rural women and stakeholders to explore personal experiences, challenges, and empowerment outcomes.
- Participant observations during community meetings, training sessions, and cooperative activities to capture everyday practices and interactions.
- Document analysis of program reports, cooperative records, and village development plans related to women's empowerment.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period, allowing for sustained engagement with the communities.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis Fenton & Baxter, (2016) was employed to identify patterns across the data. Coding focused on three key dimensions: (1) women's empowerment processes, (2) the role of social capital (trust, reciprocity, networks), and (3) contributions to household economic resilience. Themes were refined through iterative analysis, with cross-case comparisons between the two villages.

Trustworthiness

Rigor was ensured through triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research sites and participants. Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent.

RESULTS

The analysis identified four major themes concerning the role of rural women as pillars of household economies: dual economic roles, empowerment through skills and group participation, social capital as a source of resilience, and structural challenges that constrain women's agency.

1. Dual Roles in Family Economic Support

Rural women played a dual role as both income earners and household managers. Many participants combined agricultural work, handicrafts, or small trading with domestic responsibilities such as childcare and financial management. As one respondent explained:

"In the morning I help my husband in the rice field, and in the evening I sew clothes for neighbors. The income may be small, but it keeps our family stable." (Participant, Village A)

This dual contribution positioned women not merely as supporters but as central actors in sustaining household economic resilience.

2. Empowerment through Skills Training and Group Participation

Community-based programs provided women with opportunities to enhance their economic capacity. Skills training in food processing, weaving, and financial literacy enabled participants to diversify income sources. Women's cooperatives and self-help groups offered platforms for collective savings and joint business ventures. A program facilitator noted:

"When women join the cooperative, they gain not only access to capital but also confidence to market their products." (Facilitator, Village B)

Participation in such programs fostered women's agency, allowing them to make more strategic decisions within their households.

3. Social Capital as a Resource for Collective Resilience

Trust and reciprocity within women's groups emerged as crucial for navigating economic difficulties. Informal networks facilitated resource sharing, mutual childcare, and information exchange about market opportunities. One participant stated:

"If someone faces hardship, we contribute small amounts of money or food. Later, when we are in need, others will help us too." (Participant, Village B)

These practices illustrate how bonding and bridging social capital reinforced family resilience, particularly during periods of financial strain or community-wide crises.

4. Structural and Cultural Constraints

Despite empowerment efforts, women continued to face significant constraints. Limited access to broader markets restricted income growth, while cultural norms often reinforced male dominance in financial decision-making. As one village leader acknowledged:

“Women work hard and contribute to the family income, but decisions about land or larger investments are usually made by men.” (Village Leader, Village A)

Such constraints highlight the persistent gendered inequalities that limit women’s full economic potential, even in contexts where empowerment programs are active.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Evidence
Dual Roles	Women as income earners + household managers	“I farm and sew to support stability.” (Participant A)
Empowerment Initiatives	Skills training, cooperatives, group agency	“The cooperative gives confidence to market products.” (Facilitator B)
Social Capital	Trust, reciprocity, mutual support networks	“If someone faces hardship, we help.” (Participant B)
Structural Constraints	Limited market access, patriarchal norms	“Decisions about land are made by men.” (Leader A)

DISCUSSION

This study provides new insights into the ways rural women contribute to family economic resilience through empowerment initiatives and social capital mobilization (Nismawati, 2025). The findings highlight both the enabling and constraining factors that shape women’s agency in rural Indonesia.

Women’s Dual Economic Roles and Agency

The evidence confirms earlier scholarship that rural women act as both producers of income and managers of household resources (Abobaker, 2024). Yet this study extends the literature by showing how women’s agency is exercised not only through economic activities but also through decision-making in everyday household management (Syahrituah, 2025). While previous research often portrays women as supplementary earners, the findings here demonstrate that women are central to sustaining household resilience, particularly in times of economic uncertainty.

Consistent with global research on empowerment programs (Koo & Zhan, 2023), the results show that skills training, cooperatives, and microfinance initiatives enhance women’s confidence, income diversification, and decision-making capacity (Sidik, 2025). However, this study underscores the importance of collective participation, rather than individual capacity-building alone. The cooperative model, for instance, not only provided economic resources but also created spaces for women to renegotiate gender roles within their families and communities.

The findings also contribute to scholarship on social capital (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). Trust and reciprocity within women’s groups functioned as informal safety nets, enabling resource pooling and mutual support. Bridging ties—through cooperatives and local facilitators—connected women to broader opportunities, while bonding ties sustained solidarity at the community level. This integration of empowerment and social capital perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of how women collectively sustain family economies.

At the same time, the study highlights the persistence of gendered barriers, including patriarchal decision-making and limited market access. Similar constraints have been noted in rural contexts across Asia and Africa (Masasi et al., 2025), yet this study shows how women navigate these barriers by leveraging social capital to negotiate influence informally. This finding complicates binary narratives of empowerment versus subordination, illustrating instead a dynamic negotiation between agency and structure.

Theoretically, this research integrates women's empowerment and social capital frameworks within the context of rural household economies (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). It demonstrates that empowerment is not merely an individual process but a collective practice rooted in community networks and cultural norms (Satory, 2025). Practically, the study suggests that development programs and policymakers should recognize rural women not only as beneficiaries but as active agents of economic resilience. Interventions that combine skills training with the strengthening of social networks are likely to generate more sustainable outcomes. This study is limited to two rural villages, which constrains the generalizability of the findings (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Future research could adopt a comparative approach across regions or employ mixed methods to quantify the economic impact of women's contributions (Susanto, 2025). Cross-national studies would also be valuable in examining how cultural and institutional differences shape the intersection of empowerment, social capital, and family resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that rural women play a central role in sustaining family economic resilience through their dual functions as income earners and household managers. Empowerment initiatives—particularly skills training, cooperatives, and microfinance—enhance their agency, while social capital rooted in trust and reciprocity enables collective strategies for coping with economic challenges. By integrating women's empowerment and social capital frameworks, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of rural household economies and highlights the cultural dimensions of women's roles that are often overlooked in mainstream development discourse.

Beyond theoretical advancement, the findings have practical implications for policymakers and development practitioners. Programs that strengthen women's skills while simultaneously fostering community networks can generate more sustainable outcomes than interventions targeting individuals alone. At the policy level, acknowledging rural women as active agents—rather than supplementary contributors—offers a pathway for designing inclusive rural development strategies. While limited to two villages, the study provides a foundation for future comparative and mixed-method research that can further explore how women's empowerment and social capital interact across diverse rural contexts.

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