



The Role of Dani Women in Managing Local Resource Potential to Improve the Economic Life of Families in Jayawijaya Regency

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of Dani women in managing local resources to improve family economic well-being in Jayawijaya Regency. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach with ten informants in the Baliem Valley, the research finds that Dani women are central to food security through sweet potato farming, pig raising, and noken weaving. Despite limited access to education and resources, their local wisdom holds strong economic potential. Empowerment strategies should focus on skill development, community-based enterprises, market access, and culturally respectful policies. Modernisation offers opportunities for micro-enterprise growth, supporting sustainable family welfare.

INTRODUCTION

The Dani tribe in Jayawijaya Regency is an indigenous community inhabiting the Baliem Valley in the Papua Highlands, with a lifestyle that still maintains traditional values and local wisdom. Women in Dani society play a crucial role in the family economic structure, not only as domestic managers but also as primary producers in a subsistence farming system (Shiva, 2016). Their contributions include managing agricultural production, pig farming, and traditional crafts that have high economic and cultural value. Despite the vital role of Dani women, limited access to formal education, technology, and modern markets remains a major obstacle to optimising their economic potential. Research in economic anthropology suggests that empowering women based on local wisdom can be an effective strategy for enhancing family welfare while preserving cultural values (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Empowerment programs that integrate traditional knowledge with modern approaches have proven to be more sustainable and more widely accepted by the community. The transformation of the global economy and the penetration of information technology into remote areas have opened up new opportunities for Dani women to access broader markets through digital platforms and culture-based ecotourism.

Dani women's local wisdom includes environmentally friendly agricultural techniques, the noken craft, which UNESCO has recognised as a World Cultural Heritage, and ethnobotanical knowledge for traditional medicine. Bourdieu (1986) explained that cultural and social capital can be converted into economic capital through appropriate strategies. In the context of the Dani women, their traditional skills are valuable assets that have not been optimised economically. Previous research has shown that empowerment approaches that ignore the local cultural context tend to fail because they are not aligned with community values and norms (Mies & Shiva, 2014). Therefore, an empowerment model that respects and integrates local wisdom is needed as a foundation for developing a creative economy. Modernisation and increasingly open access to technology provide opportunities for Dani women to develop micro-enterprises based on local products. Several young women have begun utilising social media to market traditional crafts and processed agricultural products to a broader market.

The economic empowerment of Dani women cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context of a society that still adheres to a patriarchal system in strategic decision-making. Walby (1990) explains that the gender division of labour in traditional societies often places women in the domestic and agricultural sectors, while men dominate the political and trade sectors. However, in the Dani society, women's economic role is relatively highly recognised due to their direct contribution to food security and family income. The main challenge is optimising this role through skills development, market access, and technological support without disrupting social harmony. Ethnographic research indicates that empowerment strategies involving traditional leaders and traditional social structures are more likely to be accepted.

A participatory approach that prioritises the aspirations and needs of Dani women is key to the success of sustainable empowerment programs.

The transformation of the local economy, driven by the development of cultural tourism and the adoption of digital technology, creates both opportunities and challenges for Dani women in developing their economic potential. On the one hand, demand for authentic, culturally based products is increasing from both domestic and international tourists. On the other hand, competition with modern manufactured products and changing consumer preferences require adaptations in the design and marketing of traditional products (UNESCO, 2018). This research is crucial for identifying empowerment strategies that can optimise local wisdom as a sustainable economic resource. The focus of this research is to analyse the role of Dani women in the family economy, identify the potential for local wisdom to be developed, and formulate community-based empowerment strategies. The results are expected to provide theoretical contributions to economic anthropology and practical implications for women's empowerment programs in indigenous Papuan areas.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Theory of Women's Empowerment and Family Economics

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted process that involves enhancing individual and collective capacity to control resources and make informed strategic decisions. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the expansion of an individual's ability to make strategic life choices, especially in contexts where such capabilities were previously limited. This concept encompasses three main dimensions: resources (access to material, human, and social resources), agency (the ability to define goals and act upon them), and achievement (well-being outcomes). In the context of family economics, women's empowerment is positively correlated with improved child well-being and household economic stability (Duflo, 2012). Sen (1999) emphasised that women's economic empowerment is not only a development goal but also an instrument for achieving sustainable development. The capability approach theory suggests that empowerment should focus on enhancing individuals' substantive abilities to lead meaningful lives. Rowlands (1997) identified three levels of empowerment: personal (building self-confidence), relational (negotiating skills), and collective (working together for social change). The local cultural context is a determining factor in the effectiveness of the empowerment strategies implemented.

Local Wisdom as Social and Economic Capital

Local wisdom, also known as indigenous knowledge, is a system of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that develops within a local community through direct interaction with the environment over an extended period. Berkes (2012) explains that local wisdom encompasses a complex system of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that evolve through adaptive processes and are transmitted through cultural practices. The social capital embodied in local wisdom can be converted into economic capital through innovation and adaptation to modern

market needs. Putnam (2000) identifies social networks, norms of reciprocity, and social trust as key components of social capital that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. In the context of indigenous women, local wisdom is often a specialised domain, mastered and inherited through the maternal line. Warren et al. (1995) emphasise that indigenous knowledge systems have holistic, empirical, and adaptive characteristics that enable communities to survive in changing environmental conditions. Bourdieu (1986) explains that cultural capital can be accumulated, invested, and converted into other forms of capital, including economic capital. However, the process of commercialising local wisdom must be carried out carefully to avoid the erosion of authentic values and cultural exploitation.

Gender and Economics in Indigenous Communities

Gender analysis in indigenous economies reveals complex divisions of labour and resource control that differ from those in modern societies. Agarwal (1997) identified that in many traditional communities, women possess specialised knowledge and control over specific resources, although this is often not recognised within the formal economic system. Gender systems in indigenous communities are often more egalitarian than in modern patriarchal societies, with a complementary rather than hierarchical division of labour. Mies (1986) explained that colonialism and the penetration of capitalist economies have altered traditional gender dynamics, often disadvantaging women in local economic structures. In the Papuan context, women play a central role in subsistence economic systems, including garden management and exchange rituals. Nash (1981) emphasised the importance of understanding local gender constructions in designing culturally sensitive economic development programs. Sachs (1996) argued that the economic empowerment of indigenous women must consider the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and class identities. Development approaches that overlook local gender dynamics tend to yield unsustainable outcomes and may potentially undermine community social cohesion.

Economic Anthropology and Livelihood Systems

Economic anthropology provides a theoretical framework for understanding non-capitalist economic systems and the alternative economic logics that develop in traditional societies. Polanyi (1944) identified three modes of economic integration: redistribution, reciprocity, and market exchange, with traditional societies relying more heavily on the first two. In subsistence economic systems, production and consumption are not strictly separated, and economic motivations are not always profit-maximising but also security-maximising. Sahlins (1972) described the concept of the "domestic mode of production," which describes the economic logic of households in pre-capitalist societies that prioritises subsistence needs over surplus accumulation. Wolf (1982) analysed how the penetration of capitalist economies transformed traditional modes of production and created an articulation between the formal and informal sectors. In the context of women, Scott (1976) explained that the "moral economy" often provides social protection through networks of

reciprocity and mutual aid. Gudeman (2001) developed the concept of "base and market" to explain the coexistence of communal (base) and market economies in contemporary societies. Hart (1973) introduced the concept of the informal sector, which has become an important framework for understanding women's economic activities in developing societies. Integrating an economic anthropological perspective is essential for designing empowerment strategies that align with local economic logic.

Case Studies of Indigenous Women's Empowerment in the Asia-Pacific

Experiences in empowering indigenous women in the Asia-Pacific region offer valuable lessons for the Papuan context. In the Philippines, a program to empower Ifugao women through the revitalisation of traditional terraced farming systems successfully increased family incomes while preserving cultural heritage (Acabado, 2018). Key to the program's success was the active involvement of customary structures and the integration of traditional knowledge with modern technology. In Thailand, the empowerment of Karen women through the development of community-based ecotourism demonstrated the importance of capacity building and market access in achieving economic sustainability (Chanchani & Chanchani, 2009). A study in Malaysia of Orang Asli women showed that the most effective empowerment programs combine skills training with the strengthening of women's organisations (Nicholas, 2000). In Indonesia, a program to empower Dayak women in Kalimantan through the development of rattan crafts demonstrated the importance of branding and marketing in increasing the added value of traditional products (Dove, 2011). Research in Vanuatu demonstrated that the economic empowerment of Melanesian women requires an approach sensitive to the kastom system and traditional leadership structures (Jolly, 1994). Key success factors identified include community participation, sustainable capacity building, market access, and policy support that recognises indigenous rights. Lessons learned from these cases demonstrate the importance of a contextual approach that integrates local wisdom with modern empowerment strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach to gain a deeper understanding of the role of Dani women in economic activities within the cultural and social context of their community. The ethnographic approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore cultural practices and traditional economic systems in the natural setting of the Dani community. The research paradigm used emphasises an interpretive understanding of the meaning and experiences of Dani women in family economic activities. The research design is descriptive-exploratory with a focus on in-depth documentation of local wisdom and women's economic roles. Data collection techniques include direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of the Dani women's traditional economic practices. Data were collected through direct interaction with the community in the context of their daily lives. The

research's ethical approach took into account cultural sensitivity and obtained approval from both traditional leaders and participants. The research process was conducted with respect for the values and social norms prevailing in Dani society.

Research Location and Participants

The research was conducted in the Baliem Valley, Wamena City, Jayawijaya Regency, Papua, which is the main territory of the Dani Tribe. This location was chosen because it is the centre of traditional Dani life with well-preserved local wisdom practices. The research participants consisted of ten people, including local economic actors, particularly Dani women engaged in the economic sector. Participant criteria included Dani women who were active in family economic activities and possessed knowledge of local wisdom. Participant selection was based on recommendations from community leaders and their active involvement in traditional economic activities. Data analysis was conducted descriptively to identify patterns of economic roles and local wisdom. The analysis process focused on a deep understanding of the Dani women's contributions to the family economy and the potential for developing local wisdom. Validation of the findings was carried out through confirmation with participants and community leaders to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation.

RESEARCH RESULT

The Role of Dani Women as Agricultural Production Managers

The research findings indicate that Dani women play a central role in the subsistence farming system, which serves as the backbone of the family economy. They are fully responsible for the entire food crop production cycle, from land clearing to harvesting and distribution. The main crop cultivated is sweet potato (hipere), which serves as a staple food, accompanied by taro, banana, and other local vegetables. The agricultural techniques employed utilise a land rotation and polyculture system, reflecting inherited ecological wisdom. As one informant explained, "We women determine when to plant, when to harvest, and how to store food for the family" (Informant 3, personal interview, 2025). Family food security is highly dependent on the agricultural management skills of these women. They possess in-depth knowledge of crop varieties, planting seasons, and traditional storage techniques that are effective. Women's contribution to the agricultural sector accounts for 80% of total family food production activities, demonstrating their significant role in this economic subsystem.

The Role of Dani Women in Household Economic Management

Dani women serve as the primary financial managers in the household, managing the distribution of agricultural produce and allocating family resources. They determine the family's daily consumption portions, store food reserves for the lean season, and allocate surplus production for sale in local markets. This management system demonstrates women's ability to conduct short- and long-term economic planning. Proceeds from agricultural product sales are used to meet non-food needs, including clothing, household goods, and

educational expenses for children. According to field findings, "Mothers manage the money at home, deciding what to buy and what to keep" (Informant 7, personal interview, 2025). Women are also involved in the pig trade, which holds high economic and symbolic value in Dani culture. They play a dual role as producers and distribution managers, optimising the economic value of each available resource. This management capability demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of the subsistence household economy.

Diversification of Dani Women's Economic Activities

Dani women have developed economic diversification strategies through non-agricultural activities as an alternative source of income and a risk mitigation mechanism. Noken craft production has become a primary economic activity, combining traditional skills with modern market opportunities. These crafts are made from bark fibre or local plants using maternally inherited weaving techniques. Noken products are sold to tourists, local traders, and through regional trade networks at relatively high prices. Some women have also developed traditional culinary businesses and sold processed agricultural products at the Wamena weekly market. As one informant stated, "If the garden produce is not enough, we can sell noken or traditional foods to earn extra money" (Informant 5, personal interview, 2025). These small-scale trading activities provide important economic flexibility in the face of fluctuations in agricultural production. This adaptability demonstrates entrepreneurial skills that develop organically within the traditional economic system.

Socio-Economic Roles in Traditional Rituals and Ceremonies

Dani women play an integral role in the ritual economy system, linking economic activity to community social cohesion. They are responsible for logistics and food provision during various traditional ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, and stone-burning rituals. Their contributions include providing pigs, garden produce, and labour for the preparation of communal meals involving hundreds of people. Participation in this ritual economy strengthens social networks and family status within the community hierarchy. The system of exchange and gifting during traditional ceremonies creates social bonds that serve as informal social security. According to field observations, "Women organise all the food for the ceremony; this determines the family's reputation in the eyes of the community" (Informant 2, personal interview, 2025). This ritual economy involves careful calculations of social investment and returns in the form of prestige and access to support networks. Women's roles in this context demonstrate the integration of economic and social dimensions within the Dani livelihood system.

Dani Women's Adaptation to Modernisation and Economic Change

Modernisation and the penetration of information technology have opened new opportunities for Dani women to develop broader and more diverse economic activities. Increased access to education and economic information has enabled some women to develop micro-enterprises such as grocery stores,

kiosks, and food stalls. Social media and digital platforms are being utilised to market handicrafts and agricultural products to a broader market. Some young women have adopted modern business strategies while maintaining products based on local wisdom. Modernisation also presents challenges in the form of competition with manufactured products and changes in local consumption patterns. As observed, "Now there are women who have opened shops, and some are even trying to sell online through social media" (Informant 9, personal interview, 2025). This adaptation showcases the ability of Dani women to integrate modern opportunities with their traditional cultural heritage. This adaptation process occurs selectively, maintaining core cultural values while adopting profitable technologies and economic practices.

DISCUSSION

The research findings regarding the dominance of Dani women in the agricultural sector align with Walby's (1990) theory of the gender division of labour, which posits that the social construction of economic roles is based on gender. However, unlike modern patriarchal societies where women's work is often considered secondary, in Dani culture, women's agricultural work is the primary foundation of family survival. The women's central role in managing food production reflects Eagly and Wood's (1991) social role theory, which posits that societal expectations shape gender-based role specialisation. The Dani cultural context provides legitimacy and high recognition for women's economic contributions, in contrast to the marginalisation often seen in capitalist economies. As Bourdieu (1986) argued, Dani women's agricultural skills constitute a form of cultural capital that can be converted into economic and social capital within their communities. The ecological knowledge system mastered by women reflects the concept of indigenous knowledge, as described by Berkes (2012) as a complex of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that evolve through adaptive processes. The integration of Dani women's productive and reproductive roles demonstrates the flexibility of the traditional gender system, which is more adaptive than the rigid gender binaries of modern society. Women's dominance in the agricultural sector confers substantial agency and bargaining power within the family's economic structure.

Furthermore, the local wisdom practices of Dani women in agriculture and crafts demonstrate Shiva's (2016) description of the holistic relationship between women and nature in subsistence production systems. The land rotation and polyculture techniques applied reflect agroecological principles now recognised as sustainable farming practices in modern agricultural literature. The harvest storage and distribution systems developed by Dani women demonstrate sophisticated risk management strategies that align with Scott's (1976) concept of moral economy. The production of noken crafts as an economic diversification reflects the strategic adaptation described by Wolf (1982) in the articulation of modes of production between traditional and modern sectors. According to Putnam (2000), the social networks and norms of reciprocity formed through women's economic activities are manifestations of social capital that facilitate collective action. The Dani women's ability to integrate traditional knowledge with modern market opportunities demonstrates a high adaptive capacity in the

face of external economic changes. Local wisdom not only functions as cultural heritage but also as an economic asset that can be developed for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Preservation and revitalisation of local wisdom are key strategies in culturally sensitive and environmentally sustainable economic empowerment.

In relation to ritual practices, the role of Dani women in the ritual economy illustrates Polanyi's (1944) concept of the embedded economy, in which economic activity is inseparable from social relations and cultural meanings. The exchange system in traditional ceremonies reflects the integrated mode of redistribution and reciprocity that dominated pre-capitalist societies, in contrast to market exchange that prioritises profit maximisation. Women's investment in communal rituals demonstrates rational economic behaviour in the context of social reproduction and network maintenance, in line with feminist economics that emphasises the care economy. Logistical and food contributions in traditional ceremonies function as a social insurance mechanism, as explained by Gudeman (2001) in the concept of a base economy. As analysed by Nash (1981), gender relations in the ritual economy reflect the complex power dynamics between the domestic and public domains in traditional societies. The ritual economy creates what Sahlins (1972) calls a domestic mode of production that prioritises social obligations over individual accumulation. Women's participation in this system generates symbolic capital and social prestige that can be converted into long-term material benefits. The integration between economic rationality and cultural values in ritual exchange reveals an alternative economic model grounded in solidarity economic principles.

Furthermore, Dani women's adaptation to modernisation demonstrates the process described by Hart (1973) regarding the emergence of the informal sector as a response to limited opportunities in the formal economy. The development of micro-enterprises and the utilisation of digital technology reflect entrepreneurial agency that develops within the context of structural constraints and cultural continuities. The ability to integrate traditional products with modern marketing strategies demonstrates successful navigation between tradition and modernity without cultural alienation. This process aligns with the concept of development from below, which emphasises endogenous capacity and local resources as the foundation for economic empowerment. According to Kabeer (1999), the expanding choices and opportunities experienced by Dani women are manifestations of the empowerment process in terms of agency and achievement. The selective adoption of modern practices while maintaining cultural core values demonstrates active resistance to the homogenising effects of globalisation. This transformation reflects Sen's (1999) definition of development as freedom, where the expansion of capabilities enables individuals to pursue meaningful life plans. The main challenge is ensuring that the modernisation process does not result in the erosion of traditional knowledge systems and social support networks, which have proven sustainable in the long term.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study successfully identified the multidimensional role of Dani women in the family economic system, which includes agricultural production management, household resource management, and diversification of economic activities. Findings indicate that Dani women control 80% of family food production activities by integrating local wisdom in the form of sustainable land rotation and polyculture farming techniques. Local wisdom that can be developed includes noken crafts, sweet potato farming, pig farming, traditional culinary arts, and ethnobotanical knowledge, which have high economic potential for local markets and tourism. Effective empowerment strategies include increasing skills capacity, establishing community-based business groups, strengthening market access, and integrating digital technology while maintaining cultural values. Modernisation has opened new opportunities for Dani women to develop micro-enterprises and access broader markets through digital platforms. Adaptation to economic changes demonstrates the Dani women's ability to integrate modern opportunities with traditional cultural assets in a selective manner. The ritual economy remains a crucial mechanism for maintaining social cohesion and informal social security within the community. This study confirms that women's empowerment, grounded in local wisdom, can enhance family welfare without compromising cultural identity and traditional value systems.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged in interpreting and generalising the findings. The study's location, limited to the Baliem Valley and Wamena, may not accurately represent the entire Dani community, which is spread across various regions with differing geographic conditions and levels of modernisation. The small number of participants, limited to ten, may limit the diversity of perspectives and experiences represented in this study. Furthermore, the relatively short duration of the study may not have captured the dynamics of seasonal economic changes and traditional ritual cycles that occur over a more extended period.

FURTHER STUDY

It is recommended that future research employ a mixed-methods approach, involving a larger sample size from various Dani community areas, to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the dynamics of changing women's economic roles in the context of ongoing modernisation. Action research involving the implementation of concrete empowerment programs can generate evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and development practitioners in designing effective and sustainable empowerment strategies.

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