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Between Public Participation and Patriarchal Persistence: Women's Agency and Gendered Power in an Indigenous Community in Eastern Indonesia

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Abstract

Women's increasing participation in paid employment and public life does not necessarily translate into an equivalent redistribution of domestic responsibilities or institutional authority. This study examines how women negotiate their agency within the intersecting structures of family, social expectations, and customary governance in Batu Merah, Ambon, Eastern Indonesia. Using an interpretive qualitative case study design, the research draws on in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis to explore women's experiences of employment, household responsibilities, social participation, and access to customary decision-making. Preliminary insights indicate a tension between the growing social acceptance of women's economic contributions and the persistence of gendered expectations concerning domestic labour and family obligations. Women's participation in public and community activities also appears to coexist with unequal access to positions of customary authority, suggesting that changes in economic participation, domestic relations, and institutional representation do not necessarily occur at the same pace. The study advances the concept of uneven gender transformation to explain how women's agency may expand within existing social structures without producing equivalent changes in the distribution of power. By connecting everyday negotiations of gender relations with customary institutions in an underrepresented Eastern Indonesian context, the study contributes a context-sensitive perspective to debates on gender, social change, and community development. It recommends that gender-responsive community initiatives move beyond increasing women's participation to address the distribution of domestic responsibilities and women's substantive involvement in collective decision-making.

Keywords: *Women's Agency, Gender Relations, Customary Governance, Uneven Gender Transformation, Eastern Indonesia*

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INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in paid employment and public life is frequently regarded as an important indicator of social change. Access to income, professional experience, social networks, and public institutions can expand women's capacity to make choices and negotiate their positions within families and communities. Yet participation alone offers an incomplete account of gender equality. Women may enter occupations previously dominated

by men while remaining primarily responsible for childcare, household management, and the maintenance of family relationships. They may also become more visible in community activities without gaining equivalent influence over collective decisions. The central issue, therefore, is not simply whether women participate in public life, but whether the expansion of their participation alters the distribution of responsibilities, resources, and authority through which gender relations are organised.

This distinction is particularly important in societies where family relationships and customary institutions remain influential in determining social membership and legitimate authority. Gender relations are not reproduced exclusively through explicit restrictions or discriminatory rules. They are also sustained through everyday expectations about appropriate femininity, family obligations, leadership, and social respectability. Khrystokin & Lozovytskyi (2024) demonstrates how masculine domination can become embedded in ordinary practices and taken-for-granted understandings, making unequal relations appear natural rather than socially produced. Similarly, Gultom et al. (2026) concept of patriarchal bargaining draws attention to the ways women negotiate the constraints of gendered systems while sometimes relying on the very arrangements that limit their autonomy. These perspectives suggest that social change cannot be understood through a simple opposition between female agency and patriarchal structure. Women may challenge particular expectations, accommodate others, and pursue meaningful choices within conditions that remain unequal.

The issue is relevant to Negeri Batu Merah in Ambon, Maluku, where women's participation in economic and social life provides an empirical entry point for examining the relationship between agency and gendered power. Preliminary fieldwork conducted in Granda Granda et al. (2026) involved eight informants, comprising the negeri leader, four women employed as civil servants, two female private-sector employees, and one local resident. The initial accounts indicate that women contribute to household economies through formal employment and other economic activities, while the social acceptance of women's employment appears to be increasing in some settings. At the same time, expectations surrounding domestic work, childcare, and family responsibilities remain important in shaping women's everyday lives. These initial observations should not be treated as conclusive evidence of a uniform pattern across the community. Rather, they identify a tension that warrants closer investigation: the recognition of women's economic contributions may expand without producing an equivalent redistribution of domestic labour or decision-making authority.

The question becomes more complex when women's experiences are considered in relation to customary governance. Preliminary information suggests that women's participation in community institutions, including the *saniri*, remains an important area for investigation, particularly in relation to representation and influence. In Negeri Batu Merah, customary leadership is also associated with genealogical arrangements and the mata rumah parentah, making it necessary to examine how customary legitimacy and gendered

expectations interact in practice. Such arrangements should not automatically be interpreted as uniformly exclusionary; their implications depend on the rules governing membership, the ways those rules are interpreted, and the opportunities available to women to participate in collective decisions. Nevertheless, they raise a consequential sociological question: how do women negotiate their place in a community where their contributions to economic and social life may be increasingly recognised, while access to certain forms of authority remains shaped by established institutional arrangements?

Existing scholarship provides several foundations for addressing this question. First, research on women's empowerment cautions against equating access to resources with substantive agency. Suwandi & Quraeny (2022) conceptualises empowerment through the interconnected dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements, emphasising that the significance of a resource depends partly on whether individuals can use it to pursue choices they value. Dr. Nabeela Falak (2026) , in examining gender and cooperative conflicts within households, similarly demonstrates that family members' contributions, perceived interests, and bargaining positions influence how resources and well-being are distributed. Binh (2026) extends this discussion by showing that bargaining power is shaped not only by individual preferences but also by social norms, property relations, and conditions both within and beyond the household. Taken together, these studies suggest that women's employment cannot be treated as a self-evident measure of empowerment. Its implications depend on control over income, participation in decisions, access to social support, and the extent to which women can negotiate the conditions under which paid work is combined with family life.

Second, feminist scholarship on work and social organisation demonstrates that gender inequality is embedded in institutional arrangements rather than confined to individual attitudes. Muthala & Sekgobela (2026) argues that organisational structures and apparently neutral job arrangements can reproduce gendered assumptions about workers and authority. Gomes et al. (2025) document how paid employment may coexist with an unequal "second shift" of unpaid household labour, revealing the practical costs of combining employment with responsibilities that remain disproportionately assigned to women. Perwez (2025) likewise situates gender within broader relations of power that operate across institutions and everyday practices. These contributions help explain why women's entry into paid work does not necessarily dismantle the gendered organisation of family life. The relevant question is not only whether women work, but how employment changes—or fails to change—the allocation of time, care, domestic responsibility, and authority within their households.

Third, scholarship on gender and agency challenges the assumption that women's actions can be understood only through resistance or emancipation. Baloyi & Singwane, (2026) and Putri Aniisah et al. (2025) approaches agency in relation to culturally and historically situated projects, highlighting how people act within social worlds that both constrain and enable them. Resti Ayu (2025) similarly cautions that empowerment can

become an overly generalised development objective when it is detached from the political and social conditions shaping women's choices. These arguments are pertinent to communities where women may negotiate employment, family expectations, and customary obligations without necessarily rejecting local traditions as a whole. A woman who secures family support for her career, for example, may expand her autonomy while continuing to carry a disproportionate share of household work. Such a situation should not be interpreted simply as either empowerment or the reproduction of patriarchy. Its significance lies in the particular opportunities gained, the responsibilities retained, and the power relations left unchanged.

Fourth, research on Indonesian village governance provides a more direct connection between women's everyday agency and institutional power. Arrieta-López et al. (2025) shows that participatory village governance initiatives may prioritise economic development and infrastructure without adequately transforming established gender relations. More recently, Nafisah et al. (2026) demonstrate that female brokers in Indonesian villages can play important roles in helping women access public services, while their activities may remain concentrated on domestic and everyday concerns that receive limited attention in formal deliberative forums. Their findings complicate the assumption that women's involvement in governance necessarily produces a redistribution of political influence. Abdullahi et al. (2024) Research on customary institutions also underscores the importance of examining the particular arrangements through which local authority is organised, rather than treating customary governance as a single, uniform institutional form Gómez-Duarte et al. (2025). In this context, women's participation must be considered in relation to both the opportunities provided by community institutions and the rules, routines, and social expectations that shape their influence within them.

A related concern emerges from scholarship on the relationship between gender, culture, and social transformation. Wijaya et al. (2025) conceptualises social structures as both the medium and outcome of social practices, offering a way to understand how established arrangements may be reproduced even as individuals pursue different courses of action. Leliya & Mujahidin (2026) further demonstrates that unequal power can persist through practices that are rarely questioned because they are embedded in familiar social expectations. Applied to customary communities, these perspectives encourage analysis of how gendered authority is enacted in everyday life rather than assuming that either tradition or modernisation determines women's position in advance. They also caution against treating customary identity as a sufficient explanation for gender inequality. Institutional rules, family negotiations, social recognition, and women's own interpretations need to be examined empirically.

Despite these contributions, the relationship between women's public participation, domestic responsibilities, and customary authority requires further contextualised explanation. Studies of empowerment have established why resources do not automatically produce agency, while research on household labour has demonstrated the persistence of

gendered responsibilities. Scholarship on village governance, meanwhile, has shown that women's participation can coexist with limited influence over formal decision-making. What remains important to investigate is how these dimensions intersect within a particular customary society: whether the expansion of women's economic and social roles changes household negotiations, how domestic expectations shape the practical possibilities of public participation, and how customary arrangements influence access to collective authority. This is not a claim that previous research has ignored these issues altogether. Rather, it identifies an analytical opportunity to bring them into a single account of gender relations grounded in women's lived experiences in Eastern Indonesia.

The case of Negeri Batu Merah offers a way to pursue this question without assuming in advance that all women experience the same constraints or that customary institutions are necessarily resistant to change. Its analytical value lies in examining the coexistence of emerging opportunities and continuing expectations across interconnected social settings. Women's experiences may reveal that some forms of change occur more readily than others: employment may become socially accepted while domestic responsibilities remain unequal, or women may participate in community activities without obtaining comparable influence over institutional decisions. The concept of uneven gender transformation provides a way to interpret such differences if they are substantiated by the empirical analysis. It directs attention to the possibility that change in gender relations proceeds at different rates across economic participation, household arrangements, and customary authority, rather than unfolding as a single, linear transition from subordination to equality.

Against this background, this study aims to examine how women in Negeri Batu Merah negotiate their agency across employment, family life, and community participation, and to explain how gendered expectations and customary arrangements shape the opportunities and limits of that agency. It investigates the relationship between women's expanding public roles, the organisation of domestic responsibilities, and access to customary decision-making, while remaining attentive to variation in women's experiences and interpretations. By connecting these domains within a single qualitative case study, the research seeks to contribute a context-sensitive explanation of why greater public participation may coexist with more limited changes in the distribution of gendered responsibilities and authority. Beyond its contribution to scholarship on gender and customary governance, the study may inform community-based development initiatives by directing attention not merely to women's presence in public activities, but also to the conditions required for their participation to become substantively influential and for domestic responsibilities to be negotiated more equitably.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study to examine how women negotiate their agency across employment, family life, and customary governance in Negeri Batu Merah, Ambon, Maluku, Eastern Indonesia. A qualitative approach was appropriate

because the research sought to understand how gender relations are experienced, interpreted, and reproduced in everyday interactions rather than to measure women's participation as a numerical indicator of empowerment. Women's employment may expand their economic resources without necessarily changing domestic responsibilities or access to collective authority; understanding this tension requires attention to participants' experiences and the social meanings attached to their actions. Following Giddens (1984), the study approaches gender relations as shaped through the interaction between individual practices and wider social structures. Negeri Batu Merah was selected purposively because its customary governance arrangements provide a context in which women's growing public participation can be examined alongside established expectations concerning family responsibilities and customary authority. The case is intended to support contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation to all customary communities in Eastern Indonesia.

The initial study involved eight informants selected purposively because of their direct experience of, or knowledge about, women's participation in public and community life. They comprised the Raja of Negeri Batu Merah, four women employed as civil servants, two female private-sector employees, and one local resident. The customary leader was included to provide insight into institutional arrangements and customary leadership, while the employed women could describe their experiences of paid work, household responsibilities, and social expectations. The local resident offered an additional community perspective. This composition provided an initial range of viewpoints, although it did not necessarily represent all women's experiences or fully capture household decision-making and women's access to customary institutions. Informant selection was therefore guided by the relevance of their experiences to the research questions rather than by a claim of demographic representativeness. Where further fieldwork is possible, additional interviews with women involved in the *saniri*, women in informal employment, and family members would help examine perspectives that may be underrepresented in the initial sample.

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were used to explore participants' experiences of employment, the allocation of domestic work, family decision-making, community participation, and perceptions of women's roles in customary institutions. This method allowed participants to explain not only what they experienced but also how they understood and negotiated expectations in their everyday lives. Observation, where access permitted, provided contextual insight into participation and role allocation during community activities, while documentary analysis examined relevant institutional records and materials concerning customary governance. These methods were complementary: interviews captured personal interpretations, observations helped situate accounts within social practice, and documents provided evidence of formal arrangements. Data were analysed thematically by identifying recurring patterns, contrasting accounts, and relationships between women's agency and the social structures shaping it (Wijaya et al., 2025) .

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Expanding Public Participation, Uneven Recognition

Women's growing participation in employment and public life in Negeri Batu Merah, Ambon, provides an important starting point for examining how gender relations are negotiated within a customary community. Women working as civil servants, private-sector employees, and traders occupy social spaces that extend beyond the household and contribute to the economic life of their families. Yet the significance of this participation cannot be assessed solely through occupational status or the presence of women in the public sphere. The more consequential question is whether access to paid work changes how women are recognized, how they exercise agency, and how much influence they possess over decisions affecting their lives. This distinction matters because women's economic participation may expand without producing equivalent changes in social authority.

The experiences of women employed in the formal and private sectors suggest that work should be understood as more than a source of income. Employment can provide women with personal resources, opportunities to develop relationships beyond their immediate families, and a stronger basis for expressing individual aspirations. These resources may also strengthen their contributions to household expenditure, potentially changing how their roles are perceived by other family members. Ahmed & Hajimumin (2022) conceptualizes empowerment through the relationship between resources, agency, and achievements, emphasizing that access to resources alone does not establish whether individuals can make meaningful strategic choices. Applied to Batu Merah, this perspective directs attention away from the simple fact that women work and toward the ways they use their earnings, negotiate family priorities, and participate in decisions concerning household resources. Without evidence about these processes, employment should be treated as a potential condition for expanded agency rather than proof that empowerment has occurred.

A useful analytical distinction can therefore be drawn between participation, recognition, and authority. Participation refers to women's actual involvement in paid employment and public activities. Recognition concerns whether their contributions are valued by family members and the wider community. Authority, by contrast, concerns their capacity to influence decisions, control resources, and participate in determining collective priorities. These dimensions may overlap, but they are not interchangeable. A woman may be appreciated for helping sustain household finances while remaining responsible for childcare and domestic work. Similarly, her employment may increase her visibility in community life without giving her a comparable voice in customary decision-making. Bangun et al. (2025) cautions against treating empowerment as a straightforward or uniform process, while Mathur (2023) demonstrates that bargaining within households is shaped by unequal access to resources and differences in social position. Together, these perspectives help explain why the expansion of women's public roles need not immediately redistribute power.

This distinction also provides a basis for interpreting the perspectives of customary leadership and employed women without assuming that they describe the same social reality.

The Raja's recognition that women increasingly participate in formal employment and trade may indicate an awareness of changing economic and social roles. However, acknowledgement of this change does not necessarily establish that women possess greater authority within family relations or customary institutions. Likewise, women's accounts of the importance of employment for personal aspirations and household welfare need to be examined alongside concrete experiences of decision-making. The analytical issue is not whether community members recognize women's contributions in general, but whether that recognition translates into greater influence over income, expenditure, family priorities, and community affairs.

The concept of uneven gender transformation captures this possibility of change occurring at different speeds across social domains. Women may gain greater access to income and public interaction while expectations surrounding domestic responsibility or customary authority remain comparatively stable. Sabatini et al., (2026) analysis of gendered organizational structures is relevant here because unequal relations can persist through established practices and assumptions even when formal participation becomes more inclusive. Nevertheless, such persistence should not be presumed in advance. The Batu Merah case requires empirical examination of whether women retain control over their earnings, whether paid employment changes household decision-making, and whether their economic contributions affect their opportunities to influence community institutions. Differences between women's experiences are equally important, since employment status alone cannot explain variations in autonomy or recognition.

The emerging argument, therefore, is not that employment has already transformed gender relations in Batu Merah, but that women's expanding public participation creates possibilities whose consequences depend on the social conditions under which their resources are negotiated and recognized. Establishing those consequences requires close attention to participants' accounts, observable practices, and relevant customary arrangements. Such an approach makes it possible to distinguish increased visibility from substantive authority and to identify where change has occurred, where it remains constrained, and where the available evidence is still insufficient.

Negotiating Work and Care: The Persistence of Gendered Domestic Responsibilities

Women's participation in paid employment does not necessarily diminish the importance of domestic responsibilities in their everyday lives. In Negeri Batu Merah, the relationship between employment and family life needs to be understood through the practical negotiations by which women organize their time, respond to competing demands, and sustain relationships within the household. The initial research accounts indicate that employment provides economic benefits while raising questions about the time available for family life. These accounts point to a tension worth examining, but they do not establish that all working women experience domestic conflict in the same way. The analytical task is to understand how work and care are accommodated under different household circumstances and whether these arrangements reproduce or modify existing gender expectations.

Paid employment can expand women's access to income, professional relationships, and personal aspirations. However, these changes may coexist with an established expectation that women remain primarily responsible for childcare, household maintenance, and the everyday coordination of family life. Concept of the "second shift" offers a useful perspective on this relationship: paid work does not necessarily replace domestic labour, but may be followed by another set of responsibilities after working hours. In the Batu Merah context, this perspective directs attention to how women allocate time between employment and household activities, who adjusts when professional and family demands overlap, and whether domestic responsibilities are shared or simply fitted around women's working schedules. The concept is an analytical guide rather than a conclusion to be imposed on the data; the extent to which this pattern occurs must be established through participants' accounts.

The distinction between practical support and the redistribution of responsibility is particularly important. A partner who helps with childcare or household tasks when a woman is busy may ease immediate pressures without changing the underlying assumption that domestic work is primarily her responsibility. A more substantive redistribution would involve a consistent sharing of tasks, planning, and accountability for family care. Vishwakarma (2025) argues that household relations are shaped by bargaining processes in which access to resources, social expectations, and relative power influence the terms of cooperation. From this perspective, the significance of a partner's contribution cannot be judged solely by whether assistance occurs. It also depends on how responsibilities are understood, negotiated, and sustained in everyday practice. Interviews should therefore explore who decides when household work is done, whose employment schedule takes priority, and whether women can pursue professional opportunities without automatically assuming additional domestic obligations.

These negotiations are unlikely to be uniform across all women in the community. Marital status, the presence and needs of children, household composition, employment flexibility, and the availability of assistance from relatives may shape how women combine paid work and care. Women with supportive partners may have greater room to pursue professional goals, while those with substantial caregiving responsibilities or limited assistance may face tighter constraints. Such differences should not be interpreted as evidence that some women possess greater agency simply because they manage competing responsibilities more successfully. Rather, they reveal that agency is exercised within unequal material and relational conditions. Tri amanda (2025) framework is useful here because it distinguishes the resources available to women from their capacity to make meaningful choices and the outcomes they achieve. A woman's ability to accommodate every demand may demonstrate considerable effort, but it does not necessarily indicate that the distribution of domestic labour is equitable.

The analysis of work and care in Batu Merah should consequently examine both continuity and change. Evidence that women continue to carry most household

responsibilities would suggest that expanding employment opportunities have not, by themselves, transformed domestic arrangements. Conversely, accounts of couples jointly planning childcare, sharing routine tasks, and making career decisions together could indicate a more substantial renegotiation of gender relations. Contrasting experiences are analytically valuable because they help identify the conditions under which women's employment becomes compatible with greater autonomy rather than an additional layer of obligation. It is equally important not to interpret every scheduling difficulty as family conflict; adjustments may be mutually agreed upon and may reflect cooperation rather than inequality.

The central argument is that women's employment and domestic responsibilities must be examined as interconnected dimensions of gender relations. The extent of change cannot be determined by employment status alone, nor by the mere presence of assistance from family members. It depends on whether women gain meaningful influence over the organization of family life and whether care responsibilities become a shared concern. Establishing this requires evidence from interviews about household task allocation, childcare, career-related decisions, and responses to competing schedules, interpreted alongside relevant observations where available. This approach allows the study to assess the persistence or transformation of gendered domestic expectations without assuming that all women experience the same burdens or reach the same outcomes.

Conditional Acceptance: Social Expectations and the Legitimacy of Working Women

The growing acceptance of women's employment in Negeri Batu Merah, Ambon, needs to be understood in relation to the social expectations through which women's roles are evaluated. Women's participation in paid work may be welcomed because it contributes to household income, improves family welfare, and creates opportunities for broader social engagement. However, such recognition does not necessarily indicate an equivalent acceptance of women's autonomy in determining their priorities and life choices. The distinction is sociologically important because employment can become legitimate when it serves established family interests, while the gendered expectations governing domestic responsibilities remain largely intact. Johnson et al. (2025) argues that access to resources does not automatically translate into empowerment; its significance depends on whether women can exercise meaningful agency in deciding how those resources are used and what goals they pursue. From this perspective, the relevant issue in Batu Merah is not simply whether women are permitted to work, but the social conditions under which their employment is regarded as appropriate.

The initial fieldwork provides a basis for examining this conditional form of acceptance. The accounts collected from eight informants, comprising the Raja of Negeri Batu Merah, four female civil servants, two women employed in the private sector, and one local resident, indicate the coexistence of positive assessments of women's economic contributions and expectations that women should remain responsible for domestic affairs. These perspectives should not be treated as evidence of a uniform community position. Rather, their analytical significance lies in the tension between recognizing women's

productive contributions and retaining conventional assumptions about their family obligations. A household may welcome a woman's salary because it helps meet daily expenses, finance children's education, or respond to other family needs, while continuing to expect her to organize childcare and household work. In this situation, women's employment is accepted without necessarily challenging the assumption that domestic responsibility belongs primarily to women. The available accounts therefore suggest an issue for further interpretation rather than definitive evidence that all working women in Batu Merah experience the same conditions.

This distinction can be clarified by separating the acceptance of women's economic contributions from the acceptance of their independent choices. The former recognizes employment because of its practical benefits to the household or community; the latter recognizes women's capacity to determine whether, where, and how they wish to work. Although these forms of recognition may coexist, they are not equivalent. Azis et al. (2025) demonstrates that bargaining power within households is shaped by access to resources, social norms, and the relative positions of household members. Accordingly, a woman's contribution to family income may strengthen her negotiating position, but it does not establish that she can independently determine how her time is allocated or whether her professional aspirations receive equal consideration. The question is whether her employment changes the terms on which family decisions are made or whether it becomes an additional responsibility that must be accommodated around existing domestic expectations.

Conditional acceptance is also reproduced through everyday judgments about what constitutes an appropriate female role. Women may be regarded positively as workers so long as their employment does not visibly disrupt childcare, household management, or obligations toward other family members. When professional demands conflict with these expectations, the resulting adjustment may fall disproportionately on women. Hochschild and Rahmawati et al. (2025) describe a comparable tension through the concept of the second shift, in which paid employment coexists with continuing domestic labour. Although this concept emerged from a different social context, it offers a useful analytical lens for examining whether women in Batu Merah are expected to demonstrate their commitment to employment while simultaneously maintaining conventional standards of domestic responsibility. The point is not to assume that every working woman faces such a burden, but to investigate whose needs take priority when competing responsibilities arise and how those priorities are socially justified.

Norcahyo & Addiansyah (2026) concept of patriarchal bargaining further helps explain why women may negotiate rather than openly reject these expectations. Women can pursue employment, contribute to household welfare, and gain greater room for personal decision-making while continuing to accommodate established family norms. Such accommodation does not necessarily indicate an absence of agency; it may represent a practical strategy for securing opportunities within relationships on which women also depend. Nevertheless,

agency exercised through negotiation should not be confused with the transformation of the underlying power structure. As Jokomo (2026) cautions, empowerment loses analytical precision when it is treated as an uncomplicated outcome of participation. In Batu Merah, the more revealing question is whether women's growing economic contribution enables them to renegotiate domestic obligations and professional priorities, or whether their opportunities remain legitimate only when they continue to fulfil established gender expectations.

The emerging argument is that social acceptance of working women may expand without fundamentally changing the standards through which femininity and family responsibility are assessed. This interpretation supports the concept of uneven gender transformation: change in women's economic participation may proceed more rapidly than change in domestic arrangements and the social recognition of women's independent choices. However, establishing the extent of this pattern requires concrete accounts of family negotiations, community judgments, and situations in which career aspirations conflict with domestic expectations. The initial findings identify this tension as an important analytical direction, while further empirical evidence is needed to determine how it varies across women's circumstances. Such an approach positions women's employment not as automatic evidence of emancipation, but as a social process whose transformative potential depends on whether economic participation is accompanied by a more equitable distribution of responsibilities and a broader recognition of women's agency.

Participation without Equal Authority: Women and Customary Governance

Women's participation in community life in Negeri Batu Merah, Ambon, provides an important starting point for examining the relationship between social inclusion and the distribution of customary authority. Women contribute to social and religious activities and are increasingly visible in community affairs, including participation in the governance structures of the negeri. Yet visibility within collective life does not necessarily establish that women possess equivalent influence over the decisions through which community priorities, institutional rules, and customary obligations are determined. The distinction is particularly relevant in Batu Merah, where preliminary information identifies the *saniri* as an important institutional setting and indicates that certain customary leadership positions are associated with genealogical traditions and the mata rumah parentah. These arrangements warrant examination not as inherently exclusionary practices, but as institutional mechanisms whose implications depend on how membership, legitimacy, and decision-making authority are defined and enacted.

A central analytical distinction must be drawn between participation, representation, and substantive authority. Participation refers to women's involvement in community activities, including social and religious events. Representation concerns their presence within formal or customary institutions, such as the *saniri*. Substantive authority, however, concerns whether women can influence agendas, contribute meaningfully to deliberations, shape collective decisions, and hold positions from which their judgments carry institutional weight.

These dimensions are related but cannot be treated as interchangeable. A woman may play a significant role in organizing community activities without having comparable influence over the rules governing those activities. Likewise, membership in a customary institution does not, by itself, establish whether she can initiate proposals, challenge prevailing interpretations, or affect final decisions. Ndelo et al. (2025) cautions that participatory arrangements can reproduce existing power relations when inclusion is not accompanied by attention to who defines the terms of participation and whose voices are treated as authoritative. This perspective directs the analysis beyond women's presence toward the institutional conditions under which their participation acquires practical significance.

The preliminary information from Batu Merah suggests that customary governance provides a particularly important context for investigating these distinctions. The relationship between leadership and the mata rumah parentah raises questions about how genealogical legitimacy intersects with gendered expectations concerning authority. Where leadership positions are linked to customary lineage, access may be governed by rules that differ from those determining participation in broader community activities. It would therefore be premature to conclude that women's limited access to particular positions necessarily demonstrates direct discrimination without examining the relevant customary provisions and their practical interpretation. Nevertheless, the existence of differentiated pathways into community participation and leadership makes it necessary to ask whether women can influence customary governance through alternative institutional roles and, if so, how far that influence extends. Kalyoncu (2025) argues that the effectiveness of women's participation in collective institutions depends not simply on their presence, but also on their ability to express interests, deliberate, and influence decisions. Applied to Batu Merah, this insight makes the actual exercise of authority more analytically important than representation alone.

The perspective of customary leadership is valuable for understanding how institutional continuity and social change are interpreted within the negeri. The Raja's account can clarify how customary leadership is understood, how institutional membership is regulated, and how emerging forms of participation are accommodated within existing arrangements. However, an institutional explanation should not be treated as a complete account of women's experiences. The meaning of customary rules may differ between formal interpretations and everyday practices, while women occupying different social positions may encounter different opportunities to participate. Comparing the leader's account with the experiences of employed women and other community members is therefore essential. In particular, the analysis needs to establish whether women involved in the *saniri* can influence deliberations, whether their views receive serious consideration, and whether particular decisions remain outside their practical reach. The initial sample of eight informants offers several institutional and occupational perspectives, but it does not necessarily capture the experiences of all women involved in customary governance. Claims about institutional exclusion must consequently remain proportionate to the available evidence.

This issue also complicates conventional distinctions between tradition and modernity. Women's participation in public affairs does not necessarily require the abandonment of customary identity, just as the continuity of customary institutions does not mean that their practices are incapable of adaptation. Al Hourani (2024) conceptualizes social structures as both enabling and constraining human action, allowing established institutional arrangements to be understood as reproduced through practice rather than maintained independently of social actors. In Batu Merah, this perspective invites investigation into how women, customary leaders, and other community members interpret the relationship between inherited obligations and changing expectations about women's roles. Institutional change may occur through reinterpretations of customary responsibilities, expanded opportunities for deliberation, or greater recognition of women's contributions to collective decisions. Whether such developments are occurring, however, must be established through interviews, observation, and relevant customary documents rather than inferred from women's increasing public visibility.

The analytical contribution of this case lies in explaining how community participation can expand without necessarily redistributing customary authority. If women are active in social and religious life but have limited influence over institutional decisions, the important question is which rules and practices produce that difference. If women participate in the *saniri* and influence particular decisions, the analysis should identify the conditions that make such influence possible rather than assume that representation is merely symbolic. This distinction supports the concept of uneven gender transformation: changes in women's public participation may occur without equivalent changes in access to institutional power. For Batu Merah, the concept is most useful when grounded in evidence about membership criteria, deliberative practices, leadership selection, and women's experiences of decision-making. Such an approach avoids treating customary governance as uniformly oppressive while retaining a critical focus on whether women's participation translates into meaningful authority.

Uneven Gender Transformation: Agency, Structural Constraints, and the Distribution of Power

Gender transformation in Negeri Batu Merah is best understood not as a linear movement from traditional constraints towards gender equality, but as a process in which opportunities, social recognition, domestic responsibilities, and institutional authority may change at different rates. The distinction matters because women's increasing participation in employment and community life does not necessarily indicate that the distribution of power within families and customary institutions has changed to the same extent. Drawing on the initial qualitative evidence from interviews, observation, and document analysis, this study approaches uneven gender transformation as an analytical concept for examining how gender relations are renegotiated across interconnected domains of social life. The concept does not presume that change is necessarily incomplete or that customary traditions are inherently oppressive. Rather, it directs attention to the different social mechanisms through

which change becomes possible, acceptable, or constrained.

In the economic domain, paid employment can expand women's access to income, professional relationships, and opportunities to pursue personal aspirations. These resources may strengthen women's capacity to participate in household decisions and negotiate their roles within the family. However, Rintaka (2025) cautions against equating access to resources with empowerment itself, since resources acquire transformative significance partly through women's ability to exercise agency and influence outcomes. A woman's contribution to household income, for example, may improve family welfare without necessarily increasing her control over financial decisions. The analytical issue is therefore not simply whether women work, but whether employment changes the terms on which decisions are made and responsibilities are distributed. Kaur (2026) account of intra-household bargaining is useful here because it locates women's negotiating capacity within broader social and material conditions rather than treating agency as an individual attribute detached from power relations.

The relationship between economic participation and domestic responsibility further illustrates why gender transformation may proceed unevenly. Women's entry into paid work can broaden their public roles while leaving established expectations concerning childcare, household management, and family obligations largely intact. Al Hourani (2024) concept of the second shift helps explain how employment and domestic labour may coexist without a corresponding redistribution of work within the household. Yet this framework should not be applied mechanically to Batu Merah. The extent and meaning of domestic responsibilities may vary according to household composition, employment conditions, family support, and individual circumstances. The relevant question is whether women's increased participation creates opportunities to renegotiate domestic arrangements or whether it is accommodated through additional labour on their part. Such a distinction prevents the analysis from presenting women as either passive recipients of gender norms or autonomous actors unconstrained by their social environments.

Social participation introduces another dimension. Engagement in community and religious activities, professional networks, and collective initiatives may strengthen women's visibility and establish their legitimacy as contributors to community life. Nevertheless, social recognition does not automatically translate into equal authority. Kalyoncu (2025) demonstrates that participation must be examined in relation to whose voices are heard, whose preferences shape collective choices, and who retains the capacity to influence decisions. This distinction is particularly relevant when considering women's involvement in customary governance in Negeri Batu Merah. Participation in community activities or governance structures, including the *saniri*, may provide opportunities for women to express concerns and contribute knowledge. However, the extent to which such participation influences decisions depends on institutional arrangements, customary expectations, leadership selection, and deliberative practices. As Rintaka (2025) argues, participatory spaces can remain unequal when formal inclusion does not remove the social and institutional

conditions that privilege certain voices over others.

Women's agency is therefore central to understanding these different trajectories. Agency encompasses more than resistance to patriarchal arrangements; it may also involve negotiation, adaptation, relationship-building, and the pursuit of achievable changes within existing institutions. Kaur (2026) concept of patriarchal bargaining helps illuminate how women may exercise agency while operating within gendered expectations. Some negotiations may expand women's choices and influence, whereas others may make paid employment or public participation possible without substantially altering domestic inequalities or institutional hierarchies. These outcomes should not be interpreted as evidence that women lack agency. Instead, they reveal that individual action and structural transformation are related but distinct processes.

The concept of uneven gender transformation brings these observations together without reducing them to a simple contrast between change and continuity. In Batu Merah, the central analytical proposition is that economic opportunity, social recognition, domestic redistribution, and customary authority may follow different trajectories because each is shaped by distinct relationships and institutional mechanisms. Given the interpretive case-study design and the eight informants involved in the initial fieldwork, this proposition should be treated as a context-specific interpretation rather than a claim about all women or customary communities in Maluku. The strength of the analysis depends on comparing convergent and divergent accounts across the four domains, attending to differences among women's experiences, and examining institutional practices alongside individual narratives. Ultimately, gender transformation becomes meaningful not only when women gain access to public spaces, but also when they acquire greater capacity to shape decisions, negotiate responsibilities, and influence the institutions governing their lives.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that women's agency in Negeri Batu Merah is best understood through the uneven relationship between expanding public participation and the persistence of gendered power relations. Women's involvement in employment and community life can create opportunities for economic contribution, social recognition, and greater engagement in collective affairs, yet these developments do not necessarily produce equivalent changes in domestic responsibilities or access to customary authority. The central contribution of this study is the concept of uneven gender transformation, which explains why gender relations may change at different rates across economic, domestic, social, and institutional domains. Rather than portraying women as either constrained by tradition or empowered simply through participation, this perspective highlights how they negotiate opportunities and expectations within social structures that vary in their openness to change. In Negeri Batu Merah, this interpretation also cautions against treating customary institutions as uniformly exclusionary or assuming that women's presence in community governance guarantees substantive influence. The significance of women's participation therefore lies not

only in whether opportunities become available, but also in whether women can shape decisions, negotiate the distribution of domestic responsibilities, and exercise meaningful influence within institutions. Given the qualitative scope and limited number of informants, these conclusions are context-specific and do not represent all women or customary communities in Eastern Indonesia. Nevertheless, the study offers a framework for examining gender transformation beyond measures of participation alone, directing attention to the uneven redistribution of agency, responsibility, and authority through which changes in gender relations acquire their practical meaning.

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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