

9-2023

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Recommended Citation

Hendrastiti, Titiek Kartika; Kusujiarti, Siti; and Sasongko, Rambat Nur (2023) "The Narratives of Local Women's Resilience in Disaster and Climate Change: The Voices of Indonesian Women in the Watershed Areas," *The Indonesian Journal of Socio-Legal Studies*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.54828/ijsls.2023v3n1.4

Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/ijsls/vol3/iss1/4>

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The Narratives of Local Women’s Resilience in Disaster and Climate Change: The Voices of Indonesian Women in the Watershed Areas

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Received: September 13, 2023 | Reviewed: September 20, 2023

Accepted: September 20, 2023 | Published: September 30, 2023

Abstract

This study analyzes the narratives of women’s resilience in disaster from the post-colonial feminism approach. Ecological justice and gender issues have been addressed by other studies on Indonesia to amplify the voices of Indonesian women, but few of them focus on women’s narratives. As a culture relying on oral traditions, Indonesian women’s narratives and stories are instrumental in decolonizing the knowledge on ecological justice. Even though feminist perspectives play an instrumental role in addressing ecological justice in Indonesia, studies using post-colonial feminism remain very limited. This study employs post-colonial feminist ethnography and focuses on women’s position on the watershed governance policy in three areas in Bengkulu, Indonesia: Rindu Hati village represents rural upstream location; Talang Empat village represents the rural midstream region, and Tanjung Jaya village represents the downstream urban areas. Interviews were conducted with women who were members of peasant groups, agricultural workers, traders, village administrators, and other community members. The narratives show several important trends: (a) Women’s daily live reflects their knowledge about the environment and women’s responses to disaster and climate change indicating local eco-consciousness, resilience, and adaptation to changes. (b) Local power configuration contributes to resilience. There are interconnections of gender relations, disaster resilience, and environmental sustainability. Local power map shows the interconnection between disaster responses, environmental sustainability, and gender relations in the community. (c) Upstream population tends to have higher commitment to environmental conservation and disaster resilience compared to the communities in the midstream and downstream locations. Women’s position in the circle of power in watershed management has important influence in their resilience facing disaster and climate change. These narratives inform the interrelations of women’s positions, disaster resilience, and eco-consciousness in creating ecological justice.

Keyword: resilience, post-colonial feminist ethnography, natural disaster-climate change and pandemic, Indonesia-Bengkulu watershed area.



Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis narasi-narasi ketangguhan wanita dalam bencana dari pendekatan feminisme pasca-kolonial. Masalah keadilan ekologis dan gender telah dibahas oleh penelitian lain di Indonesia untuk memperkuat suara perempuan Indonesia, tetapi sedikit dari mereka yang berfokus pada narasi wanita. Sebagai budaya yang mengandalkan tradisi lisan, narasi dan cerita wanita Indonesia memiliki peran penting dalam mendekolonisasi pengetahuan tentang keadilan ekologis. Meskipun pandangan feminis memainkan peran penting dalam mengatasi keadilan ekologis di Indonesia, penelitian yang menggunakan feminisme pasca-kolonial tetap sangat terbatas. Penelitian ini menggunakan etnografi feminis pasca-kolonial dan berfokus pada posisi wanita dalam kebijakan pengelolaan daerah aliran sungai di tiga wilayah di Bengkulu, Indonesia: desa Rindu Hati mewakili lokasi hulu pedesaan; desa Talang Empat mewakili wilayah tengah pedesaan, dan desa Tanjung Jaya mewakili wilayah perkotaan di hilir. Wawancara dilakukan dengan wanita yang merupakan anggota kelompok petani, pekerja pertanian, pedagang, administrator desa, dan anggota masyarakat lainnya. Narasi-narasi tersebut menunjukkan beberapa tren penting: (a) Kehidupan sehari-hari wanita mencerminkan pengetahuan mereka tentang lingkungan dan tanggapan wanita terhadap bencana dan perubahan iklim yang menunjukkan kesadaran ekologi lokal, ketangguhan, dan adaptasi terhadap perubahan. (b) Konfigurasi kekuatan lokal berkontribusi pada ketangguhan. Terdapat keterkaitan antara hubungan gender, ketangguhan bencana, dan keberlanjutan lingkungan. Peta kekuatan lokal menunjukkan keterhubungan antara tanggapan terhadap bencana, keberlanjutan lingkungan, dan hubungan gender dalam masyarakat. (c) Penduduk di hulu cenderung memiliki komitmen yang lebih tinggi terhadap pelestarian lingkungan dan ketangguhan bencana dibandingkan dengan komunitas di lokasi tengah dan hilir. Posisi wanita dalam lingkaran kekuasaan dalam pengelolaan daerah aliran sungai memiliki pengaruh penting dalam ketangguhan mereka menghadapi bencana dan perubahan iklim. Narasi-narasi ini memberikan informasi tentang hubungan antara posisi wanita, ketangguhan bencana, dan kesadaran ekologis dalam menciptakan keadilan ekologis.

Kata kunci: ketangguhan, etnografi feminis pasca-kolonial, bencana alam-perubahan iklim dan pandemi, daerah aliran sungai Indonesia-Bengkulu.



I. Introduction

This study aims at generating a new discourse of gender and ecological justice by centering the narratives of the local women's group living around the riverbanks in Bengkulu, Indonesia. Using postcolonial feminist approach and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), this study analyzes the struggles of these women to gain their ecological rights and to create equal position in expressing their identities and roles in the natural resource governance. Post-colonial feminist ethnography is used in this research. The approach is effective in explaining and identifying class struggle, local resilience, cultural adaptation and fight for an ecological justice (Stacey 1988; Nencel 2014; McNamara 2009; Cornwall and Sardenberg 2014; Burgess-Proctor 2014; Gilat 2015) and contributes to amplifying the voices of the subjects whose position are highly marginalized.

This study adopts a transdisciplinary point of view that allows its encounter with socio-legal studies. The findings of this study enrich socio-legal studies that are beginning to be in demand not only by activists of legal and human rights issues, but theorists and social, cultural, and political practitioners who use the analysis of socio-legal in explaining injustice, including ecological injustice.

This study can be an example of how cases of ecology, disasters, and climate change fall into the realm of socio-legal and public policy justice. The argument of gender injustice and ecological justice, developed by researchers outside the Law School, turned out to be able to provide strength and color in explaining the issue of justice. This is where the real encounter and entry point of postcolonial feminism analysis in socio-legal learning comes in. An important issue in this research shows that many policies at various levels contain injustice, where the interests of women and vulnerable groups are marginalized. Ecological damage, which eventually becomes a heavy burden for poor women, occurs due to inequality of access in policy-making processes.

Political power imbalances in environmental management and ecological injustice take place during extreme situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also addresses the impact of the pandemic on the struggles and uses the disaster resilience concept to analyze how the local communities nurture their resilience during the pandemic in addition to uncovering the ecological injustice.

Flood and landslides along the riverbank in Bengkulu, Indonesia occur every year. The imbalance of political power affecting the watershed areas management creates ecological injustice. In the research context, the imbalance of local political power is associated with the



inequality of women's access to watershed management policies and environmental conservation arrangements due to uncontrolled climate change by rural communities. Especially those caused by the exploitation of forests and rivers due to the encroachment activities of large investors. Environmental degradation in these areas occurs due to the economic activities of those who have power and capital affecting the life of poor families living along the watershed areas.

The main factors affecting disasters in the 10 watershed areas in Bengkulu, Indonesia¹ are: (a) mining activities; (b) deforestation; (c) narrowing of the riverbanks, especially in the downstream areas of Bengkulu city due to sedimentation and waste piling up at the downstream areas; (d) problems in the catchment area; (f) sprawling growth of the settlements in the downstream areas (Nainggolan 2013).

Bengkulu watershed covers 51.951 ha; 95 km of the area located in the upstream, which is part of Central Bengkulu district. While the downstream area is located in the area of Bengkulu City. Bengkulu watershed area has 3 sub-watershed areas. These are Rindu Hati sub-watershed (19,207 hectares), Susub sub-watershed (9,890 hectares), and Bengkulu downstream sub-watershed (22,402 hectares) (Nainggolan 2013)².

The global disaster of COVID-19 is intertwined with environmental disasters and cultural issues (Ribut 2020; Balipost 2020). The pandemic is more than just a virus, it is also a cultural issue connected to local knowledge system, preventive mitigation measures, hygiene, environmental conservation, and cultural practices. Cultural knowledge in overcoming disaster serves as the guide and factor that contributes to sustainable development. The attainment of sustainable development goal is embedded in local culture and its concept of social justice.

Disaster issues are a multi-disciplinary problem involving relationships between human and non-human factors. Awareness on this interconnection is often referred to as eco-consciousness (Dar and Bhatt 2019). Social research focusing on socio-cultural phenomenon of disaster is very limited. From these studies, the study on women's involvement and agency is almost non-existent. However, the most vulnerable populations in disasters are often women, children, and other marginalized groups and during post-disaster women become active agents in the change of lifestyle. Women's narratives display both their vulnerability and active involvement during and after the disasters. Their stories and knowledge of their environments

¹ 10 Watershed Area in Bengkulu are: DAS Ketahun, DAS Padang Guci, DAS Manna, DAS Musi, DAS Las, DAS Kedurang, DAS Seluma, DAS Talo, and DAS Tanjung Aur.

² See Research location map (Figure 1)



help mitigate the disaster and convey cultural understanding of the space and place where the disasters unfold. In the context of Bengkulu watershed areas there are diverse stories based on multiple perspectives. The three locations of this research represent diverse areas in the watershed with various perspectives, experience, and knowledge in dealing with disasters and environmental degradation. In the three research locations, local policies in responding to floods, tropical forest destruction, and overcoming the Covid19 have a relatively weak position in midstream and downstream communities. Meanwhile, the position of the upstream community on local policies is stronger and considered by the male leadership (Picture 1).

II. Postcolonial Feminist Political Ecology and Indonesian Women's Narratives

Ecological disaster is interrelated with social, economic and cultural inequalities (Tierney 2019). Disaster reflects a complex interrelation of social, cultural, and political factors and the responses from local communities to withstand and recover from the disaster represents their resilience. In the resilience context, gender roles intersect with other dimensions and this analysis is often referred as gendered risk-scape in disaster and climate change issues (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti (2020). Local knowledge, stories, and narratives are pivotal in understanding the context of this risk-scape. However, analyses of this local environment need to be contextualized within the global economic and political processes. Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) is one of the perspectives that offers analyses centering on the interconnections of gender relations and environmental issue with gender division of labor and gender inequality at its core (Resureccion 2017). Similar to the postcolonial perspectives (i.e. Fanon 1967, Said 1978;2008), Feminist Political Ecology positions the voices and perspectives of the marginalized groups at the forefront in addressing ecological issues. Postcolonial feminist political ecology combines the focus on the gendered based relations of power with other intersecting factors including race, ethnicity, class, religions, and colonial experience within the context of environmental issues.

Post-colonial feminist epistemology represents an anti-monolithic approach and acknowledges non-Western knowledge as a multifaceted knowledge while also recognizing non-Western people and communities as subject—a view that has started to rise to prominence in the 1990s (Saunders 2004; Brah and Phoenix 2004). With this perspective, agencies, stories, and narratives of the communities in the Global South become the basis of the development of knowledge (Brook 1997; Spivak 2008; Mohanty 2008).

Post-colonial feminism is a deconstructive framework of its major theories. It



deconstructs globalism from western feminist theories, which emerged as the challenge to liberal feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, and structural feminism that have marginalized women's agencies in the Global South. Mohanty (2008) warns the danger of homogenizing Non-Western women as oppressed group. Spivak (2008) firmly states that post-colonialism is the major innovation in humanities and social studies by focusing on those who are perceived as unidentifiable, non-existent, and hidden subaltern groups. Colonial culture persists, metamorphizes, and mutates into imperialism (economically external) and indigenous patriarchy (socially and culturally local) (Candra, 2019). An example of situational mutation of colonial culture is observed in Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Candra's study (2019) shows that women's marginalization is legitimized by local culture and indigenous traditions through patriarchal patterns. Local narratives and stories reveal these patriarchal patterns and uncover the voices of the subaltern groups unraveling the complex factors creating vulnerabilities and resistance of the marginalized groups.

Post-colonial feminist theorists critically examine the assumption that women's identity in the southern hemisphere is monolithic (Narayan and Harding 2000; Mohanty 2008; Saunder 2004). Post-colonial feminism is the struggle of women activists from the Global South at the micro level that affect women's movement at the macro level. Women's struggle at the local level are related to their identity formation, differences in realities they face, representation of the issues addressed, and their body politics. Oppression and sub-ordination lead to 'silencing' and putting women's struggles 'in the shadow' (Spivak 2008). However, disaster and the pandemic may have created spaces for women to express their voices and disasters could uncloak the hidden structures and make inequalities more obvious (Tierney 2019). Experiences from other disasters such as tsunami and earthquake in Aceh show that the dire situations requiring significant outside intervention also provide opportunities for women to express their agencies and participate more openly in public areas (Kusujarti 2017).

In a different context, Pollock and Subramaniam (2016) note that state power and global inequality trigger social movements to fight against these power structures that intertwined with the influence of science and technology. Power relation is the main issue in the fight for justice, including ecological justice. Hegemonic power relations cover the struggles and cultural identities of the marginalized groups; theories and methodologies embedded in this hegemonic structure fail to uncover and take into account the perspectives and knowledge of the subaltern groups. This also affects cultural, language, and national identities of those at the margins. Decolonizing theories and methodologies are pivotal for feminist post-colonial approach



(Hendrastiti 2014) and Feminist Political Ecology. One of the methods in decolonizing knowledge of women in the Global South is by centering local women's narratives, practices, and their knowledge, including narratives and knowledge on their environment.

The destruction of the environment is the main concern of various disciplines and theories, including political ecology, ecofeminism, and eco-criticism approach (Dar and Bhatt 2019). Environmental issues need to be addressed through inter and trans-disciplinary approaches; they are very complex and intersected with factors such as culture, power, and literatures. Post-colonial studies of local political ecology focus on daily practices to understand socio-political constructions of contested claims of authorities the process of how local institutions reform and reproduce themselves and how gender relations are embedded in this context and are intersected with ethnicity, class, race, culture, and religion. The struggles for ecological justice, survival, and sustainable living, are expressed in the daily lives and narratives of the community members including within the context of their gender relations (Hendrastiti and Kusujiarti 2020a; Hendrastiti dan Kusujiarti 2020b). Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) explores the interconnectivity of environmental agency, knowledge production, and women's positionalities to decipher how different groups respond to environmental problems and governance policies. The postcolonial approach extends FPE by emphasizing the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and colonialism emerged out of the environmental practices (Haythurst and Centeno 2019:29).

Several studies address Indonesian women's connection to their ecological environment using local narratives, Candraningrum's study (2014) in the slope of Merapi volcano documented local women's narratives in reestablishing their ecological identity by reassessing their relationship with each other and with the nature and by respecting their natural identity. Yuliati(2014) found that women's multiple roles ranging from being responsible for her family and community's food security, managing the agricultural land, and consumption of food— have placed them as agents for preserving land, water, and forest management. The knowledge is passed on to their children and grandchildren through stories and practices. Other studies showed how crucial women's position is in the environmental and resource management, however, their knowledge and positions are often disregarded even by their own community (Elmhirst (2011a; 2011b); Hendrastiti (2019); Hendrastiti and Kusujiarti (2018). Women's strength and knowledge on environmental sustainability are often hidden, hence Postcolonial Feminist Political Ecology helps in uncovering the narratives of women's agency.



III. Feminist Ethnography and Women’s Narratives

This research employs feminist ethnography since this approach allows us to uncover women’s daily lives and narratives by focusing on their knowledge and experiences. This method was commonly used by anthropologists to reproduce knowledge, however other disciplines follow suit in using this approach (Jones dan Watt 2010: 1-12; Cerwonka dan Malkki dalam Pole 2005; Neuman 2014; Atkinson 2010; Denzin dan Lincoln 2010). Feminist ethnography provides flexibility and a toolbox composing of various specific methods. Participatory observations to understand the cultural setting as well as in-depth ethical dialogues and discussions followed by series of reflections were used to ensure active participations of the subjects. Empowerment and inclusive participations are pivotal in this type of study. Awareness of the marginalized positions of the subjects and the importance of their knowledge as the source of social transformation is part of the ethnographic research. Power relations based on the gendered social structure intersected with other factors are important elements throughout the process. Feminist ethnographers also seek to transform themselves and their perspectives with this process. Their privileges and positionalities influence the process and require continuous reflections and redefinitions of their own assumptions.

Bengkulu watershed area is the research site where power relations, ecological conflict, and movement have developed. Ethnographic methods enabled us to uncover these complex relationships and capture various voices of marginalized women that have not been exposed through public and formal discourses. Subjects of the research include village officials, women leaders, women from the marginalized social groups, and other members of the community. Questions discussed in the conversations or field talk include their life histories, their views on their village, watershed environments, and other related environmental issues, their family and community lives, and their perceptions and experience in dealing with the disasters especially with floods and the pandemic.

Both feminist ethnography and postcolonial feminist political ecology focus on unravelling inequalities and injustices by centering on the experiences of marginalized women in local watershed governance and conservation policies. Gendered methods of survival, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities, and gendered environmental politics and grassroot actions, have been at the forefront of feminist political ecology (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari 1996; Sundberg, 2015; Mollet, 2017). These issues are addressed in this research based on the narratives stemming from the application of feminist ethnography.



IV. Local Narratives and Knowledge on Environmental Degradation, Climate Change, and Disasters

A. Upstream Rural Area

Based on their daily experiences, those living in the upstream area are aware that it's difficult to categorize behaviors that lead to environmental degradation. This is not straightforward since they realize that people may create environmental disasters due to various factors. Logging and clearance of land were performed for housing and developing coffee, rubber and oil palm plantations. Mining activities in the upstream area called *Bukit Ndu*³ also leads to accelerated deforestation. The locals are aware of this situation, but they are also faced with the need of having more settlement areas because of increased population and the need for jobs.

The reduced area of productive land in the village has made several local communities losing their land and becoming a landless peasant labourer. Pushed by the economic development, *BUMDes*⁴ constructed Tourist Village infrastructures (camping ground, futsal field, pool, and rafting). Community members, including female inhabitants, suggest that the district government does not have a clear plan to preserve the village in the upstream area and to manage the long conflict between HKM⁵, the mining company, the Educational Forest of one of the universities, and the community settlement areas. Therefore, the community is left by itself to resolve those issues and make their village more sustainable.⁶

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the villagers living in the upstream area restricted people's mobility in and out of the village. They applied strict measures in the tourism area, some were closely monitored or even closed. There is indeed a sense of great concern, but people here remain focused on their occupation of working on the land to sustain their life because they refuse to receive any outside assistance. They are keeping their distance from any newcomers entering their village. They reduce their mobility to markets, parties, and crowds except for religious practices. However, after six months of applying COVID measures such as mask-using and social distancing, people started to become more skeptical about the pandemic.⁷

For the elites, the most important concern was to ensure people's adherence to the strict health protocols, while villagers had to trust that the village administrators distributed the

³ (Ibu Sam, Desa RH, 21 July 2020)

⁴ Village Enterprises

⁵ Community forest

⁶ (Ibu Sam, Desa, RH, 21 July 2020; Bapak Wen, Desa RH, 27 July 2020)

⁷ (Ibu Suar, Desa RH, 23 July 2020; Ibu Mar, Desa RH, 23 July 2020)



government aid equally. They all agreed that accountability was crucial and therefore the village administration updated and published data periodically. To reduce possibility of conflict, the administrators tried to involve the population extensively and to ensure that village policy did not aggravate the pandemic situation.⁸

B. Midstream Area

Unlike in the upstream area, people living in midstream responded to environmental degradation anxiously, especially to the problem of flooding. The periodic floods create more serious impacts recently. In the past, the houses were all stilted houses; when floods happened, villagers did not need to clean up their houses, as the goods were safe inside the home. Now, no more stilted houses are built.⁹ Stilted houses were destroyed due to old age, and they were replaced by brick houses.¹⁰

In the village, the dominant discourse on disasters is based on individual valuations rather than collective community responses.

*“Flood and drought ... It depends on everyone’s perspective. Some who are aware of the threat are always prepared. Most people here understand that this area is prone to flood. Despite this many people construct houses in flood prone areas. It seems like not many people are forward-thinking. With this threat of disaster, many people here are not prepared by supporting their own food supply. There are many who converted their land to palm-oil plantations. They haven’t thought of food supply”.*¹¹

This midstream area has a very heterogenous population, not all people are engaged in agricultural activities. The agricultural land has not been able to meet people’s minimum daily needs and most people do not plant twice a year in order to reach maximum yield. The environmental quality in the village has declined since the establishment of palm-oil and rubber mills, as the mills produced smoke and dust that create air pollution. Rather than considering themselves as being the victims of the situation, many people saw the presence of the mills as an opportunity to cultivate rubber and palm-oil. However, the forest has been degraded now the watershed area is surrounded by palm-oil plantations. According to a female resource, local women were not involved in the village's agreement on the conversion of the watershed areas

⁸ (Bapak Zum, Desa RH, 20 August 2020)

⁹ (Bapak Ek, village official Tl 4, 10 August 2020).

¹⁰ (Ibu Nas, Desa Tl 4, 13 Sept 2020)

¹¹ (Bapak Ek, village official Tl 4, 10 August 2020).



as into oil palm plantations. Although they state that they understand the severe risks involved in the change of land uses.

*“Even if there seems to be a forest, it’s actually a rubber plantation. When one of the villagers planted palm-oil the rest followed suit. In terms of ratio, the comparison is 4 to 1 (4 palm-oil plantation, and 1 rubber plantation). The temperature has increased because of its arid landscape. Soon, people’s life were disturbed by flood and drought because the forest has been degraded”.*¹²

C. Downstream Urban Area

Women’s narratives in the urban downstream area show how quickly the degradation happened. It took only 50 years, and the river water is no longer able to meet the people’s needs. As early as 1974 the water was clear and clean; economic activities took place in the river, logs and bamboo were transported through the river. All this is now replaced by road transport. The river also played an important role for children and many vacant lands around the village were used by children as their playground.¹³

“During the dry season we experience drought in our wells. To meet their water needs, many of the villagers get water from neighbors who installed drilling wells. Neighbours would collect money to construct a drilled well. The river water changed drastically too. In the past, it was crystal clear, but many people here use the river to defecate, wash and bath, because only few have wells at home. No people consume river water nowadays because it’s not good quality.”¹⁴

One participant suggests that a river floodgate is key in managing flood. The city administration does not have to add more water pumps, all they need to do is fixing the floodgate. When the river overflows, the flood gate could be closed; when the water subsides, the gate could be opened and the water from the river could flow out of it. Community members also observe that the river flow should not be altered so water could flow quickly to the river. Sadly, the government rarely responded to suggestions from the community.¹⁵

The amount of trash that drifts from the sub-river and clogs the flood gate is an important factor causing the floods. The trash carried by water from the upstream area buries the yards of people in downstream communities.¹⁶ The people in general are aware of the disaster risks due to the trash, but some refuse to change their habits. At the policy level, there is no

¹² (Ibu Fat, Desa Tl 4, 10 August 2020)

¹³ (Ibu Jura, Kel. Tj Jaya, 2 Sept 2020)

¹⁴ (Ibu Nas, Desa Tl 4, 13 Sept 2020)

¹⁵ (Ibu Jura, Kel.Tj Jaya, 2 Sept 2020) & (Ibu Res, Tj Jaya, 2 October 2020)

¹⁶ (Ibu Res, Kel.Tj Jaya, 2 October 2020)



comprehensive regulation from the district governments on the prohibition of waste disposal directly to the river. As a consequence, the downstream area is affected by this environmental pollution.¹⁷

Based on the observations, there are new housing clusters around the urban watershed area prone to flooding as rice fields are converted into housing settlements. In the urban watershed area, the majority of the population are indigenous to the region, there are almost no newcomers, so they have close-knitted kinship connection. They want to live and work closely with one another. That is why new housing settlements are constructed.¹⁸ However, some are aware that people living in the flood prone areas need to be relocated. The local community is actually willing to be relocated as long as they receive suitable compensation. Unfortunately the City Administration only compensates for the buildings, not the land, while people need to purchase land. If the government is willing to relocate the community living on the watershed area by providing a new settlement, the community will be more than happy to take the offer, "... No one will be willing to stay in area that is always inundated by the flood during the rainy season...".¹⁹

The urban watershed community responded to disaster differently from the other two villages, upstream rural village and midstream village. A couple of years- ago, many people decided to collect sands from the river to help to ease the river flow, and worked to excavate the riverbed. They believed that the flood would diminish in seven years. However, the government has banned the sand collection activity. Since then, floods continue to happen as the river silted. According to the people, coal collection is also one of the people's livelihoods in the watershed area. There were issues after many people who were not local residents started their sand-mining activity in the watershed area. The excavation of sand in the bank of watershed area has enlarged the watershed area and endangered the public settlement and the ecosystem.²⁰

Many people in the community experienced great economic advancement during the Covid-19 pandemic as many started to open up new business. Small kiosks emerge and new shops with more modern design and products attract younger consumers.²¹ Many women farmers groups emerged as they were supported by the local Agriculture Office as part of the

¹⁷ (Pak Mah, Kel.Tj Jaya, 10 October 2020).

¹⁸ (Ibu Nov, Kel Tj Jaya, 10 October 2020).

¹⁹ (Ibu Jura, Kel.Tj Jaya, 2 Sept 2020)

²⁰ (Ibu Res, Kel. Tj Jaya, 2 October 2020)

²¹ (Ibu Has, Tanjung jaya, 17/9/2020).



recovery programs. They planted vegetables to sustain themselves during the pandemic and save their family's expenses. From the conversation with the subjects appear that the position of women remains the object of the Municipality's policy. They were not invited to design scenarios for the development of their living areas, especially scenarios to overcome flood disasters.

V. The Pandemic Narratives

The local communities' awareness on COVID-19 pandemic varied. For the rural upstream farmers COVID-19 was only on the back of their mind. They could not be too much be affected by it, otherwise they would not be able to proceed with their daily activities. The concern was there but they decided not to think too much about it.²² Life proceeded pretty much the same pre and during COVID-19.²³ The community agreed to continue their daily activities at the farm and at home. They only were not able to go to the market. When they have to go outside of their village, they had to observe the health protocols strictly.

Women continuously maintained health protocols in their activities. The village administration continuously reminded the community to strictly observe health protocols and organize preventive measures such as disinfecting the neighborhood regularly. Some became tired of this when the pandemic dragged on; some of them had no other choice than continue working in order to make ends meet.²⁴ For some women the pandemic was much scarier and unpredictable than the floods.

“The hardest impact is to our economics; the rubber and palm oil price have declined quite significantly. To anticipate the spread of COVID-19 we follow the advice to stay home, and we only go out to our farm. It's practically safer in the farm since we don't interact with other people there. We wear masks every time we go to the market. Many of people in the village are now unemployed since the pandemic.²⁵

Even though most women who live in the upstream area were anxious and worried about the pandemic, they reacted differently from those who live in urban areas. Most people in the rural upstream area could lead their normal live as before, as the situation was still under control, and there were no emerging issues with the main food staple for the community,

²² (Ibu Sam, Desa RH, 21 July 2020)

²³ (Ibu Ham, Desa Tl 4, 19 August 2020 dan Ibu Fat, Desa Tl 4, 10 August 2020)

²⁴ (Ibu Er, Tl 4, 10 August 2020; Ibu Mar, Desa RH, 23 July 2020).

²⁵ (Ibu Fat, Tl 4, 10 August 2020)



especially rice. But for those in the non-agricultural sector, the impact was quite hard, especially for the community living near the factory where most of the villagers work as laborer.²⁶ The factory's operation was affected by the pandemic and must employ measures to mitigate the impact such as reduction of working hours, put workers into furlough, and part-time working hours for their workers.²⁷

VI. Women and Resiliency

In upstream rural village, farming is one of their ways to meet their family's needs. By continuing their work, they ensured their family's self-sufficiency in rice for daily needs even though seasonal changes, decreasing area of coverage, and population pressure have made this self-sufficiency more challenging.

One of the highly destroyed watershed areas and is responsible for the flooding disaster is the destruction of the *Rindu Hati* conservation forest. The stories around the destruction, conflict on the forest transformation, and illegal logging were topics that come up frequently in the narratives of local women. The upstream community have made efforts to maintain sustainability of their village despite the problems, since the forest is very important to their livelihoods.²⁸

The community in the upstream area showed strong economic resilience during COVID-19 pandemic. They managed to meet their daily sustenance needs from their own farms. They did not experience any disruption in their rice harvest,²⁹ and they maintained their purchasing power to buy other non-rice basic needs such as sugar, flour and spices from income earned from their coffee harvest. They didn't experience any decline in their coffee production. Though the village of *Rindu Hati* is an isolated village, located towards the conservation area, this village is known to produce excellent Robusta coffee, which is sold for relatively high prices, locally and nationally.³⁰

It is very interesting to note how people in *Rindu Hati* village used local wisdom and knowledge to deal with the pandemic. The local wisdom kept the people calm, among others by (a) taking the resort to God; (b) praying together to keep the virus away from the village; (c)

²⁶ Aside from working on their land, some of the jobs taken by people here are factory workers, daily workers in the plantation and peasants. Rice fields here are rain-harvest rice field since no irrigation infrastructure is available yet.

²⁷ (Bapak Ek, T1 4, 10 August 2020; Ibu Mar, Desa RH, 23 July 2020)

²⁸ (Pak SM, Desa RH, 22 July 2020)

²⁹ Fieldwork July-October 2020

³⁰ (Pak SM, Desa RH, 22 July 2020) & <https://radarbengkuluonline.com>



having strong belief that by working hard, their body heat will increase, and this is good for their immunity to maintain their health. As an traditional village, they had the ability to defend their village from outside intrusion and maintain food sovereignty.

The midstream community responded quite differently to the pandemic. Here too women had to continue working otherwise they would not have sufficient income to support their family. Many women made ends meet by working as peasants' labourers or selling food products. In that sense the pandemic did not create change. Despite the difficulties, most women in the *Talang Empat* village continued to work inside of their village,³¹ also because there is no sufficient public transportation from their village to other areas.³² During the pandemic, most women spend their time working at the plantation, even if news about how the virus was airborne instilled fear in them. Women compared the flood with pandemic, and found that whereas during floods most of the community members could not work, during the pandemic farmers could continue to work. Farming activities themselves were not disturbed during the pandemic. Though many urban residents faced furlough, most rural residents could continue their activities at the plantation.³³

The people in the watershed areas were also familiar with the pandemic aid scheme from the government. They received assistance through conditional cash transfer (PKH³⁴) and other social assistance programs. Internally they also managed an assistance program for their own community members who experience hardships. When there someone deceased in the community, family of the deceased received financial and non-financial assistance. The funds were collected from donations and saving from fellow community members.³⁵

The resiliency narrative narratives above show influence of patriarchal culture as mentioned by Candra (2019). The rural women demonstrated their abilities to maintain their traditional identities and agencies while in the urban community agency depended on local

³¹ Unfortunately, farming activity has experienced significant change. Numbers of people working as peasant have decreased as more people are interested to work in factories. People who own the farms also reduce since many of the fields are turned into housing (Ibu Nas, Talang Empat, 13 Sept 2020).

Why do many people shift to work in factory? Because peasants never show any improvement in life. The resource persons have shared how they have come with their parents, involved in the farming activities. they have such difficult life, only graduated from primary school. The family has limited financial community, so no chance for them to continue their education (Ibu Nas, Talang Empat, 13 Sept 2020).

³² (Ibu Az, Desa Tl 4, 7 Sept 2020) & (Ibu Ham, Desa Tl 4, 19 August 2020) & (Ibu Res, Tanjung Jaya, 2 October 2020)

³³ (Ibu Az, Desa Tl 4, 7 Sept 2020).

³⁴ PKH = *Program Keluarga Harapan*, is a conditional cash transfer program to support poor family. The assistance is focused on educational cost, and pregnant women.

³⁵ (Ibu Her, Kel. Tj Jaya, 10 Sept 2020).



politics. Persons who own capital manage to position themselves as local political leaders – and those are mainly men. The analysis is quite similar to the studies conducted by Pollock and Subramanian (2016).

VII. Local power configuration and women’s positions in policies.

Women have their unique ways to show their resiliency in disaster due to their distinct social and economic positions. Women’s position in the decision-making process in the three villages are described in the Venn diagram below. This diagram also shows the intersectionality of the women’s positions. The imbalance position of women in all watershed communities is very visible even though women’s knowledge and resiliency do exist (Picture 2).

In this study, women in the upstream community have more authority especially in the environmental management and disaster responses while the narratives of the women in the midstream village show that their access to power and their resilience in facing disasters are decreasing. In the downstream urban area the fact that the head of the village is a woman, does not guarantee that women have access to higher circle of power. Urban women’s resilience to disaster especially in their involvement in environmental preservation is not as strong as those in the rural areas. The Venn diagram also shows that women’s ability to organize themselves is the key for them to enter the circle of power and authority, this is true for all of the villages regardless of the locations in the watershed. Parallel to the results of the past research (i.e. Elmhirst, 2011a; Dar and Bhatt, 2019; Hendrastiti and Kusujiarti 2020), women who have already had social connection and capital such as women who have successful business have bigger chance to be included in the circle of power and authority including access to natural resources and watershed governance.

VIII. Conclusion

There has not been sufficient social study using post-colonial feminism approach addressing watershed community in Indonesia. The limited studies on women’s involvement in watershed management creates limited knowledge in local ecological politics and in rehabilitating the watershed area from disaster. This study reveals that women’s roles and agencies are declining in the urban watershed area, if this trend is an indication of the larger trend, there is an urgent need to amplify women’s voices and agency in natural resource governance and in increasing their resilience facing disaster, including the pandemic.



Women's resiliency narratives from the three watershed communities shows that rural watershed area with the predominantly farming activities is more sustainable in dealing with the pandemic, however, the community has more limited access to the state's resources. They are resilient. Their narrative on the declining quality of the environment, reduced agricultural area, extreme climate change serves as the warning sign but the narratives on how to maintain village environment is also apparent.

Unlike the rural watershed community, women in the urban community have less opportunity to express their agencies, including in local decisions. Though the women's knowledge on watershed conservation and disaster prevention were very strong in the narratives, women did not play an essential role in the policy authority circle. Social capital that women tried to build were unable to break through the patriarchal screen in the urban watershed management.

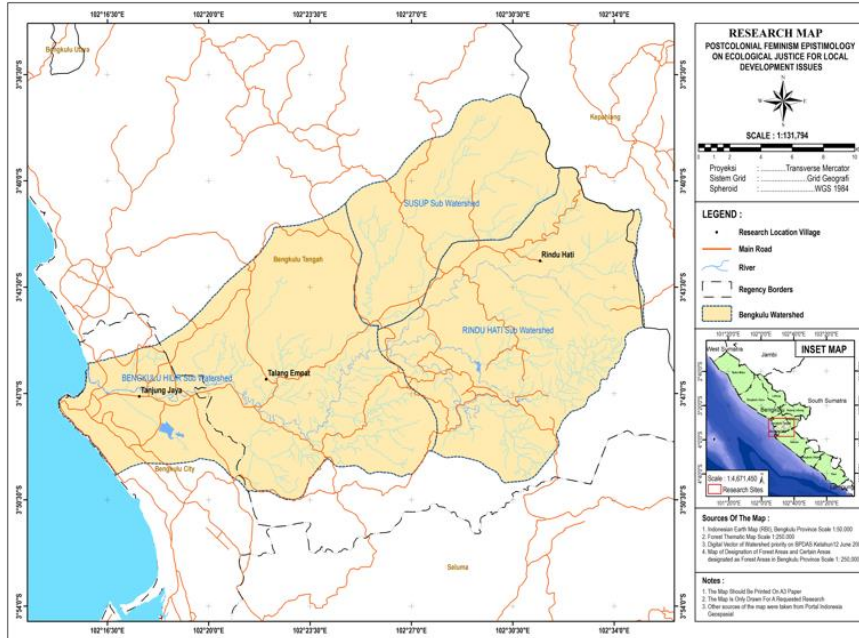
Community's leadership in the three selected villages played a significance role in placing women in the watershed management circle. This study also shows that the leadership in the upstream community enabled women to be involved and access public space more compared to the situation in the urban watershed area.

In general, the study shows how post-colonial feminist approaches enable us to have an in-depth understanding of Indonesian women's agencies and voices in the watershed communities and how they negotiate ecological disaster and local development. This study also contributes to the epistemological and methodological application of post-colonial feminism in the context of ecological disaster and the creation of a more just situation in the Bengkulu watershed areas.

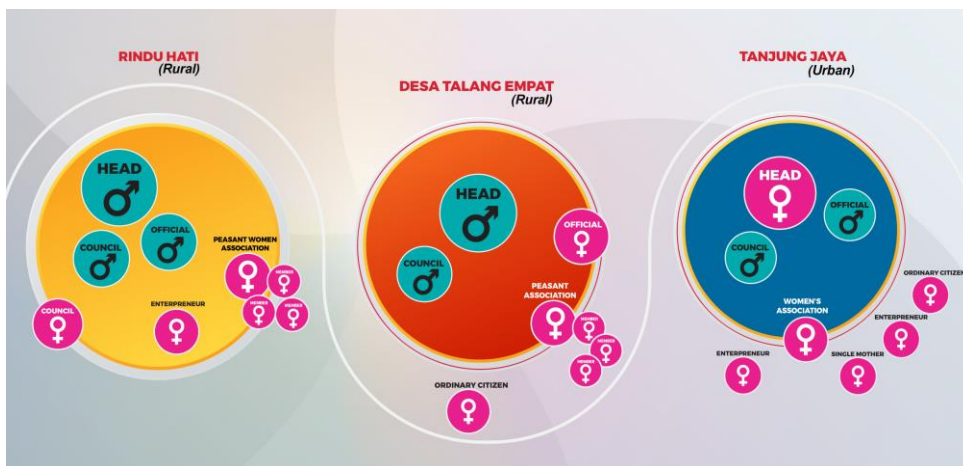


Picture

Picture 1. Location Map of three Watershed Areas in Bengkulu, Indonesia: Rindu Hati (Upstream); Talang Empat (Midstream); and Tanjung Jaya (Downstream) Source: 2020 Research



Picture 2. Venn diagram analysis of Women in the Public Authority Circle in Bengkulu watershed rural-urban area



- Notes:
- Blue for men
 - Pink for women
 - The circle size describes how big or small their authority is
 - Symbolic position shows how their distance to public authority circle is.



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