


# Gender Role Reversals in Marginal Space: Uncovering Female Breadwinners in Semi-Arid Rural Indonesia Through a Socio-Geographic Lens

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b>                      Received: 2025-07-07                      Accepted: 2025-09-08                      Published: 2025-09-30</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>                      Cultural Transformation; Gender Roles; Oeseli Village; Rural Indonesia</p> <p><b>Corresponding author:</b>                      Chalia Chistella                      Email: <a href="mailto:chalia@unej.ac.id">chalia@unej.ac.id</a>                      DOI: 10.37905/jgej.v6i2.33260</p> <p>Copyright © 2025 The Authors</p>  <p>This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC-BY-NC) 4.0 International License</p>	<p>This research explores the gender shifts occurring in Oeseli, a remote village in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. In this village, women are the primary breadwinners due to socio-geographical conditions. Through a socio-geographic lens, this research explores how semi-arid climate and geographical boundaries of Sawu Sea affects an economy and leads to shifting gender roles. Through in-depth interviews and observations, the research highlights women's dual role as caregivers and breadwinners, which is exacerbated by men's migration in seeking greater economic opportunities outside the village. Despite their significant contributions to the agriculture, livestock, and fisheries sectors, women in Oeseli face various constraints, including local resource, skill, and infrastructure limitations that hinder their full economic potential. Conceptually, this research reveals how semi-arid environmental pressures drive male labor migration and reconstruct gender roles, particularly for rural areas with limited natural resources such as Oeseli. It provides a new socio-geographical explanation of how ecological constraints lead to gender shifts. This qualitative case study research emphasizes an imperative for interventions that empower women, address gender inequalities, and foster sustainable development. By bridging the traditional cultural practices with the evolving socio-economic realities, this research advocates for a more equitable distribution of labor and resources. In the end, the research aims to increase community resilience and achieve gender equality in Oeseli and similar contexts.</p>
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## 1. Introduction

In most societies, traditional gender roles have assigned domestic and caregiving responsibilities primarily to women, whereas men are regarded as the main breadwinners (Olia, D., B. & Sabbagh, G., 2023); (Harrington & Maxwell, 2023); (Lee et al., 2020). This phenomenon is in line with the Gender Role Theory proposed by (Bales & Parsons, 2014), which explains the division of gender roles in the family, where women are often placed in expressive (domestic) roles while men take on instrumental (breadwinner) roles. However, several communities in rural areas have experienced social, economic, and cultural shifts that have brought women to bear the twofold responsibility of being caregivers and breadwinners ((Dzogbenuku et al., 2022); (Kaur & Kapuria, 2020); (Kong et al., 2024). This situation is evident in Oeseli, a remote village in Southwest Rote sub-district, Rote Ndao Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. These changes reflect the gender transition study described by (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2014), highlighting how gender inequality in household affairs is still strong, even though income disparities have changed as they are influenced by norms and attitudes towards gender roles.

Previous research has shown that traditional Minangkabau matrilineal systems in Western Sumatra, Indonesia place women at the center of the economy and social structures, giving women considerable power in the sociocultural environment (Mansoer, M., D., 1970; Sebastian, 2022). In these contexts, women are perceived as the main source of household income, contrasting the gender roles found in numerous other cultures. Similar to Minangkabau, the phenomenon of the gender shift can also be found in South Sulawesi (Daris et al., 2024; Tamsah et al., 2020). Women play an important role as breadwinners (Asnawi et al., 2020). However, their contribution is often underestimated because there is insufficient empirical evidence on their economic involvement. This study highlights the phenomenon that occurred in Oeseli, where women replaced men as the primary breadwinners.

Oeseli women are stigmatized as laborers who can fulfill the needs of their families. Meanwhile, men are often seen as idle or contributing only a small amount to their families' finances. However, this does not imply

that women are granted decision-making rights in their households. Women who are breadwinners do not have many opportunities for household decision-making, as seen in many parts of Africa (Annan et al., 2021; Ibourk & Elouaourti, 2023; Medagbe, K. et al., 2020). Similar phenomena also prevail in Southwest Nigeria and rural Bangladesh (Matthew et al., 2020; Mensah, 2023; Sen et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to empower women to address gender inequalities.

This research presents shifting gender roles through a socio-geographic lens in Oeseli Village, a semi-arid rural area in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, where women are becoming the primary breadwinners owing to socio-geographic conditions. Previous studies on female breadwinners in Indonesia have primarily focused on other contexts; Tamsah et al. (2020) studied South Sulawesi but framed women's agricultural contribution as supplementary, while (Sebastian, 2022) highlighted women's empowerment in the matrilineal system of Minangkabau.

Unlike previous studies that focused on fertile urban or rural areas, this study highlights how geographical constraints, such as limited agricultural productivity and reliance on marine resources, shape women's economic roles. The study further explores the coexistence of women's dominance in the economy with prevailing patriarchal norms, providing a slightly nuanced understanding of gender fluidity in a patriarchal society. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQs): (1) How do socio-geographic conditions in semi-arid rural Indonesia reshape traditional gender roles? (2) How do women in Oeseli Village negotiate their dual roles as breadwinners and household managers? (3) What are the implications of these shifting gender roles on local social, cultural, and economic structures?

This study addresses a dynamic rarely explored in the existing literature, particularly in the context of semiarid rural Indonesia.

## 2. Method

This study sought to explore how semi-arid socio-geographical conditions in Oeseli Village shape shifting gender roles, particularly the emergence of women as the main breadwinners. The approach used is qualitative, with a case study design, as it is suitable for understanding social phenomena in depth in a particular context (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The unit of analysis in this study is the interaction between the socio-geographical conditions of Oeseli Village and changes in traditional gender roles. The research location is Oeseli Village, Rote Ndao Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province.

The research participants consisted of 12 people, five women who were the main breadwinners in the family, five men from the same community, and two village government officials. The participants were selected because they were considered capable of providing relevant and in-depth information (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The women were selected because they are the main actors in the shifting economic roles; the men were selected to understand the perceptions of the changes, while the village government officials were involved in providing the views of the institutions and policies.

The criteria for female participants were as follows: at least 25 years old, married, the main breadwinner of the family, and acknowledged by the community as someone who fully understands the socio-economic conditions of the village. Meanwhile, the criteria for male participants were as follows: at least 25 years old, married, not the main breadwinner of the family, and recognized by the community as someone who understands the socioeconomic conditions of the village.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of Research Informants

Code	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Socio-Economic Role	Description
W1	Female	29	Married	Primary breadwinner (farmer, laborer)	Works as a smallholder farmer and casual agricultural worker
W2	Female	37	Married	Primary breadwinner (fisherwoman)	Regularly engages in near-shore fishing and water collection
W3	Female	24	Married	Primary breadwinner (casual laborer)	Dependent on daily-wage agricultural work
W4	Female	33	Married	Primary breadwinner (farm laborer)	Works mainly on other people's land
W5	Female	41	Married	Primary breadwinner (livestock breeder)	Raises pigs as a main source of income
M1	Male	30	Married	Household head (unemployed)	Relies on remittances and extended family
M2	Male	28	Married	Household head (unemployed)	Aspires to work in migration sector but inactive locally

Code	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Socio-Economic Role	Description
M3	Male	45	Married	Household head (seasonal fisher)	Goes fishing only during certain seasons
M4	Male	38	Married	Household head (seasonal fisher)	Works irregularly depending on fishing season
M5	Male	35	Married	Household head (unemployed)	Occasionally works as casual laborer
G1	Male	38	Married	Village apparatus (Secretary)	Responsible for village administration
G2	Male	42	Married	Village apparatus (Sub-village head)	Oversees community affairs in a hamlet

Source: Field data, 2024

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs), while secondary data were obtained from the BPS and relevant literature. In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants' homes or in a mutually agreed neutral location, lasting between 45–90 minutes. This method was selected to capture participants' subjective experiences and perceptions in detail (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The interview guide focused on three themes: household roles, economic experiences (farming, fishing, and odd jobs), and perceptions of the Tuku Belis tradition. In addition, an FGD was carried out with five participants (two women, two men, and one government official) at Oeseli Beach, lasting approximately 120 minutes. The FGD was designed to confirm and enrich interview findings while also highlighting group dynamics related to women's dual roles and men's migration aspirations (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Furthermore, field observations were conducted to directly examine economic practices, the gendered division of labor, and the influence of physical conditions on socio-economic roles (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Lastly, documentation was collected from the local BPS to complement and triangulate the primary data.

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative approach, according to (Miles et al., 2014), in the following stages: First, data reduction was carried out by transcribing interviews, taking field notes, and conducting initial coding. Second, categorization was done by grouping the data into themes such as domestic work, economic roles, marital traditions, and migration aspirations. Third, the stage of data display involved compiling tables, matrices, and narrative descriptions of the findings for comparison across participants. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted by interpreting the socio-geographical meaning of the findings and triangulating the data through a comparison of interviews, FGDs, observations, and documentation. To enhance validity, the study applied triangulation of both sources and methods by comparing the results of interviews, FGDs, field observations, and relevant secondary data (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Results

The Table 1 illustrates the diverse socio-economic roles of research participants, highlighting a clear gendered pattern in livelihood responsibilities. Women (W1–W5) predominantly act as primary breadwinners, engaging in farming, fishing, livestock breeding, and casual labor to sustain their households, despite also carrying domestic responsibilities. In contrast, men (M1–M5) are identified as household heads, yet many are unemployed or only involved in seasonal and irregular work, often relying on remittances, extended family support, or limited opportunities in fishing and casual labor. Meanwhile, male village officials (G1 and G2) occupy formal administrative positions, reflecting their authority in community governance. This distribution of roles underscores the socio-geographical shift in which women increasingly shoulder economic responsibilities, while men's contributions are often shaped by migration aspirations or seasonal constraints.

According to 2023 population census data, Oeseli Village has 2,028 inhabitants, consisting of 1,015 men and 1,013 women. The village has an area of 6,17 km<sup>2</sup>, resulting in a population density of 328,69 people per km<sup>2</sup>. According to the (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019), this value is considered high.

The sex ratio in Oeseli Village is 100,02, reflecting a balance between the number of men and women. Data from the (BPS-Statistics Rote Ndao, 2024) also revealed that there was no population migration in or out of Oeseli Village in 2022 and 2023. This means that population changes are influenced only by births and deaths. The birth rate in the village is fairly stable, with births ranging from 20 to 40 babies per year.

### 3.1.1. Cultural traditions as socio-geographic constraints on gender roles

Interviews conducted with residents indicated that marriages in Oeseli Village generally take place between community members who know each other, with most marriages being arranged by the family if the individual has not yet found a partner. One female informant explained:

*“Katong su hubungan tiga tahun, terus menikah. Kalau sonde menikah, cepat-cepat keluarga carikan suami.”* (Female 3, 24 years).

“We had been in a relationship for three years before we married. If a woman does not marry soon, the family will quickly find her husband.” (Female 3, 24 years).

In addition, the practice of Tuku Belis, a Rote Ndao customary tradition, still applies. This tradition facilitates marriages in, which man's family and relatives contribute to the cost of the wedding. This practice reinforces the transactional dimension of marriage, reflecting the patriarchal structure of local society. Interviews with the village also highlight the persistence of Tuku Belis in shaping marital relations. As one village government official stated:

*“Orang-orang di sini masih pegang kuat tradisi Tuku Belis. Jadi kalau laki-laki su bayar belis, dorang rasa su beli perempuan”* (Village government official, 38 years).

“People still strongly adhere to the Tuku Belis tradition. So, when a man has paid the bride price, he feels as if he has bought the woman.” (Village government official, 38 years).

This statement reflects how local customs sustain the transactional nature of marriage and reinforcing patriarchal norms in rural communities. Such practices align with (Kandiyoti, 1988) theory of patriarchal bargaining, where women's roles are constrained by sociocultural expectations despite their increasing economic contributions. In contrast, studies from matrilineal societies, such as the Minangkabau (Sebastian, 2022) show that marriage traditions can empower women by granting them economic and social influence.

The implications of this study are threefold. Socially and culturally, the practice of Tuku Belis limits women's agency in household decision-making even when they are the main breadwinners. Economically, it reinforces kinship-based obligations that place additional financial burdens on men's extended families. Theoretically, these findings illustrate how spatially embedded traditions in semi-arid rural Indonesia sustain gender inequality, complicating efforts towards women's empowerment and sustainable rural development.

### 3.1.2. Women's dual roles: domestic and economic

Our findings reveal that women in Oeseli Village simultaneously bear the double burden of domestic and economic responsibilities. Beyond household chores, they undertake physically demanding tasks such as fetching clean water from a source located approximately one kilometer away from the village. As one informant emphasized:

*“Katong harus jalan pi sumber air tiap pagi sore. Kalau sonde ambil air, sonde bisa makan, sonde bisa minum.”* (Female 2, 37 years)

“We have to walk to the water source every morning and evening. If we do not fetch water, we cannot eat; we cannot drink.” (Female 2, 37 years)

In addition, they participate in the agriculture and livestock sectors, although the semi-arid climate and rocky soil limit their agricultural productivity. Many families do not have enough land to farm, and some poor families work as farm laborers on other people's lands. These findings align with (Hanson, 2008) socio-geographic perspective that environmental and spatial constraints disproportionately shape women's labor roles. However, they contrast with (Tamsah et al., 2020), who found that, in rural South Sulawesi, women's participation in agriculture is primarily supplementary, whereas in Oeseli, women's contribution is central to household survival.

Although women bear the main burden of fulfilling family needs, they still negotiate their role within the framework of patriarchal norms by recognizing the symbolic position of men as the head of the family. This form of negotiation shows that women's adaptation is not only practical, but also strategic in maintaining social harmony.

These implications are multi-faceted. Women's dual roles can socially exacerbate gender inequality, as they must fulfill essential domestic duties while maintaining the household economy. Culturally, this reflects the resilience of patriarchal norms, where men retain symbolic authority despite their minimal economic contribution. Economically, the findings demonstrate the structural vulnerability of households that depend almost entirely on women's labor. Theoretically, this supports Kandiyoti's (Kandiyoti, 1988) notion of patriarchal bargaining, where women adapt and negotiate within oppressive structures of oppression by taking on additional responsibilities to ensure the survival of their families.

### 3.1.3. Women's participation in fisheries

Our findings indicate that women in Oeseli Village play a central role in sustaining household livelihoods through their active participation in small-scale fisheries. Despite the village's proximity to the resource-rich Sawu Sea, the sector remains underutilized because of limited access to fishing equipment, capital, and skills. Within these constraints, women have adapted by engaging in traditional methods such as using nets during high tide and spears during low tide. As one woman explained:

*"Kalau laki-laki sonde pigi laut, katong perempuan tetap harus turun, ambil ikan atau rumput laut, supaya bisa jual ke pasar."* (Female 4, 42 years)

"If the men do not go to sea, we women still have to go, to catch fish or seaweed so we can sell it at the market." (Female 4, 42 years)

Marine products, such as fish, seaweed, and sea grapes, are typically traded in Ba'a, the capital of Rote Ndao Regency. However, because most households lack boats and fishing gear, women often walk long distances to coastal areas, relying on their physical labor rather than technological support. This illustrates how women negotiate their roles, balancing domestic duties with active economic contributions and compensating for men's limited participation in local economic activities.

These findings align with (Daris et al., 2024), who argue that women's involvement in small-scale fisheries in Eastern Indonesia is critical to household survival, but remains undervalued in policy frameworks. They also contrast with studies from South Sulawesi (Asnawi et al., 2020), where women's contribution to fisheries is framed as supplementary, while in Oeseli women are indispensable actors.

These implications are significant. Socially, women's participation challenges the cultural expectation that men should dominate marine livelihoods; yet their authority in decision-making remains minimal. Economically, reliance on women in fisheries reflects both the resilience and fragility of household livelihoods in a semi-arid coastal context. Theoretically, these findings expand discussions on gender and development by highlighting how socio-geographic constraints—limited infrastructure, environmental challenges, and male out-migration aspirations—reshape women's economic roles in fisheries.

### 3.1.4. Male migration aspirations and the growing burden on Women

Our findings also highlight the role of male migration aspirations in shaping gendered divisions of labor in Oeseli Village. While the proximity to the Sawu Sea suggests the potential for mobility through fisheries and seafaring, in reality, no significant out-migration has occurred in the past two years. Many men expressed aspirations to work outside the village, particularly after hearing the success stories of relatives or neighbors who found employment as seafarers or in industrial jobs in Kupang. However, limited networks, capital, and formal qualifications restrict such opportunities, leaving these aspirations largely unrealized.

One male informant explained his reluctance to engage in local economic activities, believing that opportunities awaited him elsewhere.

*"Beta pung om su janji bawa kerja di kapal. Jadi beta sonde terlalu mau kerja kebun atau pi laut, tunggu saja kapan dipanggil."* (Man 3, 28 years)

"My uncle promised to take me to work on a ship. So I do not really want to work in the fields or go fishing; I am just waiting to be called." (Man 3, 28 years)

This narrative illustrates how aspirational migration influences men's behavior, reducing their participation in agriculture, livestock, and fisheries. Although men position themselves as future breadwinners, women are left to shoulder the immediate burden of household survival. Consequently, women adapt by combining

domestic responsibilities with fishing, farming, and trading to meet their daily needs, while men preserve symbolic authority within the household.

These findings resonate with studies on “aspirational migration” (Korzenevica, 2020), where men’s dreams of mobility shape local labor divisions even without actual movement. However, they contrast with the cases in Central Java (Murniasih et al., 2021), where male migration effectively reduces women’s burdens through remittances. In contrast, in Oeseli, unrealized migration aspirations leave women with a double physical and emotional burden.

The implications are multi-layered. Socially, this creates tension within households, as men’s symbolic authority remains unchallenged, despite their minimal contribution. Culturally, this reflects the endurance of patriarchal norms that validate male aspirations over women’s lived realities. Economically, it reveals the fragility of household livelihoods that depend almost entirely on women’s labor. Theoretically, this case illustrates how patriarchal bargaining operates within the context of unrealized migration, in which women negotiate survival strategies, while men negotiate status through anticipated but uncertain opportunities.

### 3.1.5. Implications of shifting gender roles

Taken together, the findings from Oeseli Village reveal that shifting gender roles produces complex and layered implications for rural communities in semi-arid Indonesia.

Socially, women’s increasing responsibility as both breadwinners and household managers reshapes household dynamics, but simultaneously intensifies gender inequality. While women provide the majority of labor and income, symbolic authority and decision-making power remain concentrated in men’s hands. This tension reflects what (Kandiyoti, 1988) terms patriarchal bargaining, in which women adapt to exploitative systems while sustaining household survival.

Culturally, traditions such as Tuku Belis reinforce the transactional nature of marriage and perpetuate patriarchal norms. Even as women assume primary economic roles, cultural expectations continue to position them as dependent, constraining their agency. This finding contrasts with matrilineal societies such as the Minangkabau, where marriage customs enhance rather than restrict women’s social influence (Sebastian, 2022).

Economically, the feminization of survival labor exposes the structural vulnerability of households in Oeseli. Women dominate agriculture, livestock, and fisheries yet remain unsupported by sufficient technology, capital, or institutional recognition. The dependence of household livelihoods on women’s labor suggests fragility: if women’s capacity is compromised, the entire community economy risks collapse.

Theoretically, these findings expand the current debates on gender and development by situating patriarchal bargaining within a socio-geographic framework. The semi-arid environment and limited migration opportunities intersect with cultural traditions to produce a unique gender paradox: women carry the economic burden but retain limited formal authority. This dynamic, rarely addressed in the existing literature, underscores the need to integrate socio-geographic constraints into the analyses of rural gender shifts.

## 3.2. Discussion

### 3.2.1. Demographic and cultural context of oeseli village

Oeseli is the most populous village in Rote Ndao Regency. Based on the 2023 population census, this village has a total population of 2,028, consisting of 1,015 men and 1,013 women, with a limited area of 6.17 square kilometers. It can be stated that the population density is 328.69 people per square kilometer. According to the (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019), the population density in Oeseli village is classified as high. This population density in remote villages may lead to vibrant social and economic dynamics. It is also possible to face challenges, such as resource management for sustainability.

Based on interviews conducted with government officials from the Rote Ndao National Statistical Agency, the sex ratio of Oeseli village is 100.02, indicating a balanced demographic structure between men and women. This balance affects the social and economic aspects of the population, such as labor force participation and social stability (Sen et al., 2020). Therefore, a balanced gender ratio is fundamental to creating an inclusive society.

Furthermore, data from 2022 to 2023 reveal that, out of 485 households in Oeseli, no new residents migrated in or out of the village (BPS-Statistics Rote Ndao, 2024). Without migration, the population depends entirely on birth and death. This would, of course, have an impact on the demand for marriage, especially in societies that see large families as desirable, such as Oeseli.

According to Rote Ndao National Statistical Agency, although there is no in-migration or out-migration, the birth rate in Oeseli is relatively stable, with 20–40 babies born each year. This stability reflects a community that upholds traditional norms around family and reproduction. Interviews with residents revealed that

individuals in Oeseli typically seek a life partner when they reach the appropriate age and often choose a partner from the community they know from school or social circles. If an individual does not find a spouse, their family often steps to arrange for the marriage. This practice is in line with the patriarchal bargaining theory (Kandiyoti, 1988), which highlights how women and men navigate traditional gender norms and family expectations to secure social and economic stability. While this strengthens local community cohesion, it also limits exposure to external influences. These dynamics underscore the interaction between cultural norms and demographic patterns that shape Oeseli's socioeconomic structure.

### 3.2.2. Woman's dual role in response to environmental limitation

A subsequent phenomenon arises from the prevailing mindset, viewing marriage as a transactional relationship in which a woman, once married, is considered "bought" by her husband. This perception reinforces the expectation that women should prioritize serving their husbands and children. This often leads to the sacrifice of women's wellbeing. This mindset perpetuates patriarchal norms, as described by (Walby, 1989), who states that patriarchal systems entail male dominance over women in both the private and public spheres.

Traditionally, women in Oeseli who are "bought" through marriage are supposed to focus on household responsibilities such as housework, while men take the breadwinner role. However, Oeseli's geography has forced a significant shift in these gender roles. Unlike typical household tasks, women in Oeseli are also responsible for obtaining clean water for their families, a task that requires them to walk approximately 1 km from the village to the nearest water source. This additional burden highlights the relationship between environmental challenges and gendered labor, as women must navigate semi-arid landscapes and limited infrastructure to fulfill their domestic roles. This situation is in line with a socio-geographic perspective that emphasizes how environmental and spatial factors shape gender roles and employment dynamics (Brunn, 2019; Hanson, 2008). The necessity for women to perform such physically challenging household duties underscores the disproportionate impact of environmental constraints on their daily lives, further contributing to gender inequality.

This situation is exacerbated by the demand for women to help men with physical tasks outside the household such as farming. The area's semi-arid climate, rocky terrain, and less-fertile alluvial laterite soils limit agricultural productivity. There are a limited number of crops that can be grown, such as coconut, palm (lontar), corn, sorghum, sweet potatoes, and peanuts, with palm and corn as the main commodities (Lasibey & Milyardo, 2022; Ufi et al., 2021). However, not all families have an adequate amount of land to cultivate these crops. In some cases, poor men in Oeseli marry poor women. These families have no choice but to become laborers on other people's land.

The interviews revealed that women in Oeseli agreed to marry low-income men for several reasons: The top reason is love. Another reason is fear of loneliness in old age. This is closely related to the deep-rooted mindset of Oeseli, in which a large family is desirable. Despite these motivations, Tuku Belis, a traditional custom of Rote Ndao, ensures that men with lower economic capabilities can also "purchase" their wives. Tuku Belis involves the gathering of relatives and extended family members from the groom. They collectively contribute funds or resources to the groom's wedding at wedding costs.

The practice of Tuku Belis reinforces the transactional nature of marriage, as the woman is symbolically "bought" and obligated to serve her new family. This tradition illustrates patriarchal bargaining theory (Kandiyoti, 1988), which explains how women adapt to systems that oppress them by internalizing societal expectations. The practice of Tuku Belis highlights the entrenched patriarchal norms in Oeseli, where women's roles are servants of the family, regardless of their personal aspirations or economic contributions.

### 3.2.3. Woman's participation in marine-based livelihoods

In terms of economic contributions, Oeseli women with low economic conditions often join their husbands to work in other sectors. Apart from agriculture, livestock farming is also one of Oeseli's economic drivers, with chickens and pigs being the mainstay (BPS-Statistics Rote Ndao, 2024). Geographically, Oeseli's semi-arid climate and limited productive land make livestock farming an alternative. Livestock farming does not require large areas of land and can adapt to the rocky soil conditions in villages (BPS-Statistics Rote Ndao, 2024). In this sector, as with the agricultural sector, most livestock are owned by the rich, while the poor work as laborers tending to other people's livestock.

The existing economic disparity forces many poor families to pursue additional income, specifically fishing. In the fisheries sector, Oeseli has huge potential, as it is directly adjacent to the Sawu Sea, a migration route for fish from Australia to the Pacific Ocean. The Sawu Sea provides abundant marine resources, as it is connected to nutrient-rich ecosystems (Sari, B., 2024). This provides abundant fish resources and makes

fishing an important economic activity in the village (Murniasih et al., 2021; Sari, B., 2024). However, the huge fishing potential in Oeseli is not directly proportional to the productivity of local fishermen, who are mainly from households. This is because of a lack of adequate fishing equipment and infrastructure.

The nutrient-rich Sawu Sea indicates that Oeseli has great potential for producing many marine catches. Fish, seaweed, and sea grapes can also thrive here (Murniasih et al., 2021; Sari, B., 2024). Most marine catch, including fish and non-fish products such as seaweed and sea grapes, are marketed in Ba'a, the capital of the Rote Ndao district. Women also play an essential role in this sector. These women also contribute to the regional economy, not only the household economy. They participate in traditional fishing methods using nets at high tide and spears at low tide to catch fish. However, despite their active participation, the potential of seaweed and sea grape cultivation has not been fully maximized because limited equipment and technical skills hinder the optimization of these resources. Therefore, it is important to empower women and other community members to maximize the sustainable economic potential of Oeseli's marine resources.

#### 3.2.4. Male labour disengagement and migration aspirations

Men in Oeseli generally recognize that providing for their families is their responsibility. However, those who do not own any land for farming, livestock rearing, or other specialized skills are starting to perceive that relying on local employment opportunities on Rote is not enough to fulfill their family's needs. Over the past decade, many men have been compelled to seek income outside the island. This trend was encouraged by the success of some migrants who managed to secure stable livelihoods as seafarers or in the industrial sector in Kupang, the capital of East Nusa Tenggara Province.

The stories of these successful migrants inspired many locals to follow their footsteps. This reflects the broader economic challenge faced by rural communities in Indonesia, where limited local opportunities encourage local individuals to seek better prospects elsewhere. However, this trend towards migration has created a gender shift. This is because an increasing number of men who want to work outside the island are taking responsibility for the women left behind.

However, getting a job outside Rote Ndao is not easy for Oeseli locals. Proper skills are the main prerequisites for obtaining employment in other areas. However, the majority of them only graduated from primary school, while only a small number graduated from junior high school and senior high school (BPS-Statistics Rote Ndao, 2024). This poses a significant barrier to employment outside the island.

Despite these barriers, the pledge of their peers, who have succeeded as migrant workers, motivates them to pursue opportunities outside the island. Interestingly, data from the last two years show that not a single resident has officially migrated off-island, suggesting that the challenge of finding work off-island may be insurmountable for many (BPS-Statistics Rote Ndao, 2024). However, they remain confident that they will soon find work like their peers. This, in turn, makes many men increasingly reluctant to engage in local occupations, such as farming, livestock rearing, and fishing in Oeseli. This shift in attitude reflects the broader phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration driven by economic aspirations, as highlighted by studies of migration patterns in Indonesia (Murniasih et al., 2021). However, this trend also exacerbates the burden on women, who have to manage households and economic activities in the absence of male family members, thus deepening gender inequality in the village.

As a result, men in Oeseli began to neglect local work that was traditionally considered their responsibility, such as farming, livestock rearing, and fishing. Tasks that were once dominated by men are now increasingly shouldered by women. Meanwhile, men spend most of their time socializing with friends, believing that they will soon find work off island and bring prosperity to their families.

This shift in behavior reflects the growing gap between their aspirations for off-island employment and the reality of limited opportunities, as indicated by the lack of migration recorded in the past two years (BPS-Statistics Rote Ndao, 2024). Reliance on hopes for future success, rather than active engagement in local economic activities, further exacerbates the burden on women, who must now fulfill the dual role of caregivers and primary breadwinners. These dynamics underscore the persistence of patriarchal norms, where men's symbolic role as the head of the household remains intact even as their practical contribution diminishes. This situation calls for interventions that can address men's economic aspirations and the disproportionate burden placed on women, as well as ensure a more equitable distribution of labor and resources within society.

## 4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the shifting gender roles in Oeseli Village are deeply shaped by socio-geographic constraints. Women's dual responsibilities as breadwinners and household managers highlight how semi-arid environments, limited agricultural productivity, and reliance on marine resources restructure household survival strategies. At the same time, patriarchal traditions such as the Tuku Belis continue to restrict

women's agency, illustrating a paradox in which women are central to the economy but marginal in decision-making. These findings contribute to broader debates on gender and development by extending the concept of patriarchal bargaining to the socio-geographic realities of semi-arid rural Indonesia.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was relatively small and limited to selected breadwinners, several men, and local officials, which may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives within the community. Second, the focus on one village restricts the generalizability of the findings to other sociogeographic contexts in Indonesia. Third, the study concentrated primarily on women's dual roles in agriculture, fisheries, and domestic work, leaving other dimensions of rural transformation, such as education, health, or political participation, less explored. Future research could address these limitations by employing a larger sample, including comparative multi-village case studies, and by broadening the thematic scope to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender shifts in rural Indonesia.

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