


Women as the Unsung Heroines in Indonesia's Agriculture

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“The struggle for food security is inseparable from the struggle for gender justice.”

Food insecurity is more than just a matter of calories. It is often framed as a technical issue of increasing production and improving distribution. In Indonesia, where agriculture forms the backbone of rural life and sustains millions, food insecurity is shaped by deeper structural inequalities. Gender stands at the heart of these disparities, yet it remains consistently overlooked in agricultural reform and policymaking.

In what follows, the article reveals how feminist approaches, especially those rooted in socialist and postcolonial thinking, bring into focus the invisible foundations of Indonesia’s food security. These feminist lenses do more than advocate inclusion, they challenge the very foundations of food security discourse by questioning whose labor is recognized, whose land is protected, and whose knowledge shapes the future.

Educational Disparities and the Value of Women’s Knowledge

Let us begin with the root causes: education and access to knowledge. Though gender parity in Indonesian education has improved at the national level, the rural-urban divides remain stark. This educational gap often lays the groundwork for economic dependence, limited mobility, and constrained decision-making power. Girls from low-income and Indigenous communities face higher drop-out rates due to child marriage, domestic labour expectations, and lack of access to menstrual hygiene facilities (UNICEF, 2021). These barriers to education limit their ability to later engage with agricultural training, community leadership roles, or modern technologies. Consequently, the cycle of exclusion begins early and reinforces itself through generations.

Indigenous women often face multiple layers of exclusion, not only due to gender but also due to ethnicity and geographic marginalization. Their unique ecological knowledge, shaped by generations of experience, is frequently dismissed or overwritten by formal, state-driven agricultural models. In places like Papua or East Nusa Tenggara, this erasure is compounded by limited access to educational infrastructure, making it difficult for Indigenous women to advocate for their needs or participate in broader food policy conversations.

Access to education is not just about school enrollment, it’s actually about whose knowledge is valued. Even among women who are highly capable farmers or community leaders, their

knowledge and practices are often dismissed as informal or outdated. This devaluation reflects both capitalist and patriarchal logics that rewards commodified, male-dominated forms of knowledge while erasing localized, feminized ones (Shiva, 2016). Amy Lind (2010) expands on this critique by showing how global development institutions often perpetuate these gender dynamics. In agricultural development, for instance, programs tend to prioritize technical, market-oriented expertise, typically associated with men, while overlooking the essential, everyday knowledge that women apply in sustaining local food systems. Lind also highlights that in parts of Latin America, funding flows disproportionately to male-led cooperatives, sidelining women’s subsistence farming that is crucial for household food security.

While these patterns of gendered exclusion are evident in Latin America, they are equally present in Indonesia. Here, women’s vital contributions to agriculture are often overlooked in policy decisions, reinforcing gender hierarchies within rural communities (UN Women, 2022). A critical feminist lens, especially one rooted in socialist feminist thought, exposes how the economy and gender ideology intersect to create structural inequalities. In this case, food security cannot be reduced to mere nutritional intake, it must also encompass access to resources, autonomy in decision-making, and authority within systems that shape food and livelihoods.



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Source: World Bank (2022)

Invisible Contributions of Women in Agriculture

In many rural areas across Indonesia, women are both cultivators and caretakers. They manage household food supplies, tend to crop, participate in informal trading, and act as stewards of community nutrition. Yet, their contributions are rarely recognized in official agricultural statistics or land ownership records. According to the World Bank (2022), only 24% of land certificates in Indonesia bear women's names, despite their central role in farming. Without legal ownership, women are systematically excluded from credit schemes, subsidies, and decision-making spaces that are essential to long-term food resilience. In a village in Central Java, for instance, it is not uncommon for a woman who has cultivated rice paddies for decades to still require her husband's signature to access government assistance, reflecting broader legal and cultural barriers faced by women across Indonesia (Monash, 2020).

To understand how these inequalities play out on the ground, we turn to the lived experience of one woman who embodies the resilience and burden shouldered by many rural Indonesians. These structural gaps are vividly illustrated by women like Mama Reti, a 50-year-old farm laborer from Indramayu, who lives at the frontlines of climate change and gendered labor. With farming income declining due to erratic weather patterns—flooded fields in the rainy season, cracked soil in the dry—she earns only around Rp100,000 per day, and only during planting or harvest seasons.

To keep her family fed, she takes on additional work crafting handmade accessories for small profits and grows vegetables on a donated plot of land. Her daily life reflects the double burden many rural Indonesian women carry: sustaining household food security while navigating unstable income and environmental stress, all without formal recognition or support (KPA & SPI, 2022).

This exclusion is not accidental, it is embedded in historical and cultural assumptions about gender roles. As feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe (2000) reminds us, what is considered “international” or “strategic” has long been shaped by masculinized ideas of power, while the domestic, the everyday, and the feminine are relegated to the margins. In the context of food security, this translates into policies that prioritize large-scale agribusiness, export quotas, and national rice stocks, while sidelining the micro-level realities of how food is actually grown, processed, and shared within households. While calories can be quantified, the care work, informal trade, and household labor that sustain food systems remain invisible in most development metrics.



Hidden Insecurities in Indonesia's Agricultural Planning

The imbalance of power is also evident in decision-making. Village-level agricultural programs in Indonesia often channel funding and resources through the figure of the “head of household”, a category frequently interpreted as male. This institutional bias is further reinforced by cultural norms that associate leadership with masculinity. As a result, even well-meaning rural development programs risk reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies if they fail to critically assess their own assumptions about gender and power (Arora-Jonsson, 2011).

Feminist scholar J. Ann Tickner (1992) argues that traditional security discourses focus on military threats and state-centric power, while ignoring the insecurities faced by marginalized groups in everyday life. In Indonesia, food insecurity among women-headed households, especially in provinces like East Nusa Tenggara and West Papua, is not a consequence of war or conflict, but of systemic neglect. In a region where rainfall is erratic and land is difficult to cultivate, women often lead community food strategies like drying corn, foraging wild tubers, and managing small livestock. Yet, when government aid arrives, it is often allocated to the male head of the household, bypassing the women who hold the actual knowledge and labor power to make that aid effective.

Conclusion

Rather than positioning women as passive beneficiaries, a more equitable approach would recognize them as agents of food sovereignty. This means rethinking the very terms of engagement: who defines success, who sets policy priorities, and whose voices are heard in planning forums. Feminist theory, particularly its postcolonial and socialist variants, critiques the tendency of top-down development programs to impose external frameworks without centering lived realities (Mohanty, 2003). In the Indonesian context, this is a call to not only include women in agricultural development, but to reimagine development itself through their lens.

Ultimately, the struggle for food security is inseparable from the struggle for gender justice. Indonesia cannot achieve long-term resilience by treating food as an isolated sector. It must confront the interlocking systems of patriarchy, capitalism, and historical marginalization that determine who eats, who grows, and who decides. Girls' education must be treated not as charity, but as infrastructure. It must elevate local knowledge, challenge land ownership norms, and build inclusive institutions that reflect the real architects of rural survival.

“As Enloe challenges us to ask, “Where are the women?”, the better angle that we must pursue is “Who controls the land? Who controls the knowledge? And whose security are we actually protecting?”

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