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Gendered Power in Green Economy Practices in Aceh, Indonesia

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A B S T R A C T

Abstracts This study examines how cultural values shape gender-based power relations in green economy practices in Aceh, Indonesia. By responding to climate change and environmental degradation, Indonesia's green economy policies aim to strike a balance between economic growth, ecological sustainability, and social justice. This study employed a qualitative case study approach, collecting data through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis with key informants, including women activists, government officials, civil society leaders, and green entrepreneurs. Findings indicate that Islamic and patriarchal norms limit women's participation in environmental governance. However, egalitarian values and transnational feminist discourses are gradually opening up space for women's leadership. For example, women farmers leading organic farming initiatives leverage religious networks to gain legitimacy in male-dominated public arenas. The study concludes that gender-based strategies rooted in local wisdom are crucial for strengthening women's collective agency in achieving a just and inclusive green transition in Indonesia. Integrating cultural understanding into policy frameworks will ensure a socially just and culturally grounded transition to sustainability.

A. INTRODUCTION

The issue of climate change and environmental degradation has become a pressing global concern over recent decades (Rai & Fulekar, 2023). Natural disasters, extreme weather events, and declining ecosystem quality have significantly impacted the sustainability of human life and the planet (Bercht, 2021; Chen et al., 2015). In response, many countries, including Indonesia, have adopted systemic approaches to sustainable development, notably the green economy model that seeks to balance economic growth with natural resource efficiency, ecosystem sustainability, and social justice. Indonesia's green economy policies span sectors such as energy, agriculture, and food security, which are deeply intertwined with rural livelihoods dependent on

natural resources. This transition primarily follows a socio-ecological framework that emphasizes inclusivity and sustainability principles (Maretaniandini et al., 2025; Saliba, 2017; Zou & Punjwani, 2025).

However, implementing green economy policies in Indonesia faces challenges, notably insufficient attention to gender dimensions (Deiningger et al., 2023; Ray, 2016; Yulianingsih & Herawati, 2022). Despite normative commitments such as the Beijing Platform for Action and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Goal 5 on gender equality, women's perspectives are often relegated to administrative formalities without meaningful integration into planning, decision-making, and policy execution. This disconnect reflects a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and practice, manifesting as weak commitment to gender justice in environmental governance (Menton et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2024;

Rahmania et al., 2025; Saha et al., 2022). Incorporate core anthropological frameworks on gender and culture, for example, Haraway (2019) on situated knowledge, Ortner (2008) on gender and culture, Tsing (2022) on multi-species ethnography, and Rayner on socio-technical systems (1987), to deepen the theoretical grounding of gendered environmental governance.

One fundamental cause of this weakness is the entrenched patriarchal values within social and institutional structures that position men as central holders of power and authority, limiting women's access to strategic sectors such as energy, agriculture, and climate mitigation (Afiff, 2022; Bell, 2016; Tabur, 2021). Women frequently occupy peripheral roles as implementers or beneficiaries, rarely engaging in policy formulation or evaluation, due in part to masculine institutional cultures and low female representation in legislative and executive forums (Esteves et al., 2024). This gendered power imbalance not only narrows participation but also constrains policy innovation attentive to vulnerable groups' needs (Enqvist et al., 2016).

In Aceh Province, Indonesia, the intersection of cultural, gender, and environmental policy dynamics is particularly complex. The region's strong Islamic-patriarchal traditions, legal pluralism, and customary norms coexist with significant potential for green economy development, including renewable energy and organic agriculture. Women's long-standing activism has further catalyzed movements toward equitable and sustainable transformation. However, critical empirical research examining the nexus of gender, culture, and green policies in Aceh remains limited. Situating this context within broader debates in political anthropology and ecofeminism highlights how local cultural meanings, moral orders, and power asymmetries shape environmental governance and women's ecological agency (Agarwal, 1998; Hajad & Ikhsan, 2024; Swer, 2020). These perspectives emphasize that environmental practices are not merely technical or economic processes but are embedded within symbolic systems, gendered hierarchies, and culturally specific interpretations of nature and authority... By explicitly linking these cultural typologies to gender dynamics, the analysis reveals how local cultural logics in Aceh both reproduce and challenge institutionalized power structures, thereby constraining or enabling women's agency in sustainability transitions.

However, Aceh also has great potential in developing the green economy sector, such as using renewable energy and organic farming. In addition, the long history of the women's movement in Aceh shows that there is a social force that can be mobilised to encourage transformation towards equitable and sustainable development. Unfortunately, very few studies have examined this aspect critically.

Research on gender integration in environmental policies and green development is limited to five main aspects. First, it focuses on normative and institutional approaches such as gender integration in the National Medium-Term Development Plan and sectoral regulations, but its implementation is weak (Rohman & Larasati, 2020; Wardani, 2019). Second, it highlights the contribution of women in ecological communities and

forest conservation, but has not been formally recognised due to the dominance of patriarchal structures (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Azizah, 2023). Third, the socio-cultural approach and power relations that see access to resources beyond the formal framework of the state (Elmhirst, 2011; Nightingale, 2011). Fourth, studies in Aceh are still minimal and have not linked the role of women to green policies and local culture (Dewi et al., 2024; Inayatillah, 2023). Fifth, the Cultural Theory approach that assesses the influence of cultural orientation on policy and gender has not been widely used, even though it is important to understand the local context more comprehensively (Maznevski et al., 2002; Thompson, 1997).

This research thus examines how cultural values and orientations influence gender mainstreaming in Indonesia's green economy governance, with a focus on Aceh Province. By combining cultural and political anthropology, it provides a nuanced understanding of how local meanings and social hierarchies mediate women's agency in sustainability transitions. The novelty of this study lies in integrating local cultural analysis with environmental and gender policy research, an approach still rare in Indonesian scholarship. Using Aceh, Indonesia, as a case study deepens our understanding of the structural barriers to women's participation while highlighting the transformative potential of local actors, such as women's organizations, progressive traditional leaders, and social movement networks. Furthermore, it explores how global norms, such as the SDGs and international human rights frameworks, are interpreted and negotiated within local cultural contexts.

Empirical data indicate gender inequality in the green economy sector, particularly in agriculture, which is the primary source of livelihood for most rural communities in Aceh. The results of the 2023 Agricultural Census Complete Enumeration show that in Aceh, the number of female farmers who own land is 14.47%, while male farmers are 46.35% (BPS-Statistics of Aceh Province, 2023). They face the same inequality in land ownership due to socio-cultural structures. In Aceh, this phenomenon is exacerbated by customary norms and religious teachings that are often interpreted conservatively, thereby reinforcing a rigid gender-based division of labor, where women are considered more suitable for domestic roles and are therefore not involved in decision-making regarding green economy policies. This injustice reinforces the social exclusion of women and weakens community resilience to environmental and economic crises.

This study employs Mary Douglas's Cultural Theory (1999) to examine how cultural orientations, specifically hierarchy, egalitarianism, and individualism, not only shape collective behavior and institutional logic in environmental governance but also actively regulate gendered participation in green economy policymaking. These orientations serve as more than static social frameworks. They function as dynamic mechanisms that legitimize authority, define social roles, and produce recurring patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

To deepen this political dimension, the study draws on James C. Scott's (2012) concept of domination and resistance as well as Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) notion of symbolic power. Together, these perspectives reveal how

Aceh's cultural hierarchies and religious norms serve as dynamic arenas in which gendered power is continuously reproduced, legitimized, and contested. This theoretical synthesis ultimately frames environmental governance as both a cultural system and a political field, within which meanings, authority, and gender participation are constantly negotiated.

Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to interdisciplinary debates that bridge culture, gender, and public policy. Its findings are expected to inform the formulation of culturally sensitive, ecologically sustainable, and gender-equitable green economy policies in Indonesia, particularly through participatory and inclusive approaches suited to Aceh's socio-cultural landscape.

B. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore how cultural values shape the process of gender mainstreaming in green economy policies in Aceh, Indonesia (White & Cooper, 2022). This approach was chosen because it captures the social complexities and local dynamics that cannot be fully explained through quantitative methods. Through case studies, researchers can understand the interactions between regional actors, institutional representations, and cultural constructions in the interpretation and implementation of policies at the community level.

The research was conducted in Central Aceh and Bener Meriah Districts, Aceh Province. Both locations were purposively selected due to their contrasting yet complementary socio-cultural characteristics. Central Aceh exhibits a relatively open social structure with increased female participation in sustainable agriculture programs, while Bener Meriah reflects a more conservative social pattern with a strong influence of Islamic and customary authorities. This comparison provides a rich context for understanding how cultural values and gender discourses are negotiated in green economy practices at the local level.

Research informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in gender, culture, and environmental governance issues. A total of ten individuals participated: seven women and three men. This number was considered adequate for exploratory qualitative research because the primary focus was on the depth of information, not the quantity of data. The principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016) served as a guideline for determining sample adequacy, with each informant selected to represent different social and institutional roles such as local officials, traditional leaders, environmental NGO members, and women's group representatives, thus enriching the analytical perspective. Thematic saturation was reached by the ninth interview, and a tenth interview was conducted to ensure consistency of the results. Table 1 displays informant characteristics that help clarify the relationship between their social positions and the views they expressed.

Table 1. List of Informants

No	Category of Informant	Background	Gender	Number of Informants
1	Women activists/ NGO leaders	Representatives from women's rights and environmental NGOs advocating gender equality and sustainability	Female	2
2	Local government officials	Officials from Bappeda, Environmental Agency, and Office for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection	1 Female, 1 Male	2
3	Academics and researchers	University lecturers and local scholars working on gender, culture, and policy studies	Female	1
4	Traditional and religious leaders	Ulama and customary figures influencing social norms and cultural interpretations of gender	Male	2
5	Women entrepreneurs / farmers	Women involved in organic farming and small-scale green enterprises	Female	2

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary studies. Interviews were conducted based on a guide that focused on three main themes: perceptions of gender and culture in environmental policy, women's participation in green economy programs, and the social dynamics influencing their implementation. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, was recorded with the informant's permission, and was transcribed verbatim. Field observations were conducted over two months (August-September 2024) during various activities such as community meetings, sustainable agriculture training, and regional policy

forums. Field notes were compiled daily to document the social context, non-verbal expressions, and gender-based interaction patterns. Additionally, policy documents, program reports, and local media archives were analyzed to trace official narratives and compare them with community experiences.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, with stages including transcription, repeated reading, initial coding, theme clustering, and cross-case interpretation. This process enabled the researcher to identify interrelationships between key themes such as customary authority, women's agency, and policy adaptation to cultural contexts. Figure 1 shows the analysis flow from data collection to the formation of interpretive themes, helping readers understand the analytical steps visually and systematically.

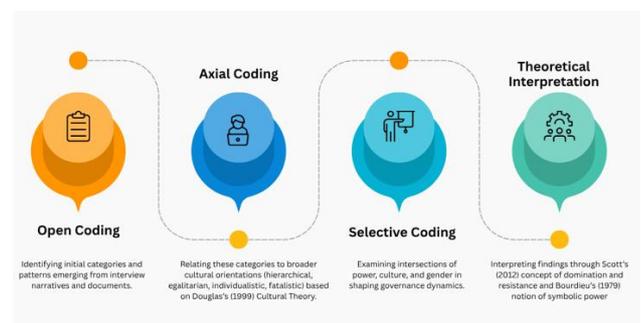
To maintain the credibility of the research, reflexivity was carried out continuously. The researcher recognized the potential bias that might arise from being an outside researcher, which could influence how informants expressed their views. Furthermore, interpretive biases toward more progressive women's narratives were minimized through peer debriefing and triangulation between sources. Differences in context between the two research sites were also addressed through a cross-case comparative analysis approach. This reflective effort aimed to maintain transparency and reliable interpretation throughout the research process.

Data were collected using three complementary qualitative techniques designed to capture both institutional and experiential dimensions of gendered environmental governance. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face with selected informants to obtain detailed narratives about their lived experiences, cultural values, and interpretations of the policy process. The interview questions were developed based on a thematic guide derived from the study's conceptual framework, focusing on the intersections of gender, culture, and environmental governance. The guide was pre-tested with two participants who shared similar profiles to the primary informants, allowing refinement of question clarity, sequencing, and cultural sensitivity before the whole data collection began. Second, document analysis was carried out on regional development plans, local regulations, NGO reports, academic studies, and media articles to understand how gender and sustainability discourses are framed and institutionalized. Third, participant observation was conducted in green economy workshops, women's organization meetings, and public consultations, allowing direct insight into everyday power relations and participation dynamics.

Fieldwork was carried out between September 2024 and April 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, was conducted in settings familiar to the participants, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The combination of interviews, document analysis, and participant observation provided a form of methodological triangulation that strengthened the credibility, contextual depth, and interpretive validity of the findings, consistent with the principles of qualitative case study research.

The collected data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 12 Plus software to organize and code qualitative data systematically through a four-stage process: open coding to identify initial categories from narratives and documents; axial coding to relate these categories to broader cultural orientations (hierarchical, egalitarian, individualistic, and fatalistic) based on Douglas's (1999) Cultural Theory; selective coding to examine how power, culture, and gender intersect in shaping governance; and theoretical interpretation informed by Scott's (2012) concept of domination and resistance and Bourdieu's (1979) notion of symbolic power. This analytical synthesis elucidates how cultural orientations operate not merely as social classifications but as political instruments that legitimize authority and structure participation in environmental governance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Stages of Thematic Data Analysis



Source: Processed by authors with the framework Douglas (2025), Scott's (2012), and Bourdieu's (1979)

Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained to address positionality and potential cultural bias. The research team, comprising one woman and three men with prior experience in community-based studies in Aceh, drew on their diverse backgrounds to enhance access to the field and sensitivity to local norms. Continuous reflection, peer debriefing, and triangulation across data sources were employed to ensure interpretive rigor and faithful representation of participants' perspective.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Patterns of Gender Inequality in Green Economy Practices

Local cultural structures in Aceh are predominantly hierarchical and patriarchal, with men as the central authority holders in social and economic life. In the context of a green economy, such as agroforestry, this structure dramatically influences the distribution of roles based on gender. Although women contribute significantly to agricultural practices in planting and land maintenance, they are still seen as complements to men's roles. Women are not considered the main actors in the economic cycle because local cultural values still limit their space for movement in the public sphere and decision-making. This unequal power relationship is maintained by social norms that make men the "head of the family" and the central figure in production relations and resource ownership.

Field findings reveal that Acehnese rural society remains deeply structured by patriarchal cultural frameworks, where men occupy central roles as formal heads of households and holders of authority. This hierarchy is reinforced through religious, customary, and legal practices that define men as public actors and women as assistants. Women's contributions in agricultural production are substantial, covering planting, maintenance, weeding, and harvesting, yet their work is socially interpreted as helping men rather than representing independent economic participation. As one female farmer explained:

Patriarchal frameworks strongly shape rural Acehnese society, positioning men as heads of households and primary authority figures, reinforced through religious, customary, and legal norms. Women contribute significantly to agricultural production, planting, tending, weeding, and harvesting, but their work is often seen as supporting men rather than as independent economic activity, making it largely invisible. Observations from fieldwork show how these gendered roles and social perceptions work together to maintain patriarchal structures in rural Aceh. As one female farmer explained:

"I work from morning until evening in the garden, but my husband is the one who goes to the meetings. He said, I don't need to join because it's for group leaders, and that means men." (Female farmer, Bener Meriah, 2025)

Observation data corroborate this finding: in seven of the eight farmer groups observed, meeting attendance was overwhelmingly male, with an average of 95% male participants. Women, though highly active in field labor and production processes, were nearly invisible in deliberative or decision-making spaces.

Green economy practices, which theoretically uphold the principles of sustainability and inclusivity, have not automatically led to gender justice at the practical level. In several villages observed, this approach has even become a new medium for reproducing traditional power relations when not accompanied by critical awareness of structural inequality. Instead of promoting transformation, women's involvement often remains technical, focused on planting, maintenance, and harvesting, without inclusion in strategic planning or cooperative leadership. This dynamic represents what Woodward (2009) calls symbolic invisibility, a condition in which women's critical labor contributions are essential yet remain institutionally and symbolically unacknowledged.

During field observations in Central Aceh, women were seen leading collective harvesting, scheduling planting rotations, and handling drying processes, whereas men dominated discussions on pricing, marketing, and partnerships. This labor division reflects a structural and symbolic segregation: men as strategists and decision-makers, women as executors and caretakers of productivity (see Table 1).

Table 2. Distribution of Roles Based on Gender

Production Stage	Role of Men	Role of Women
Production Planning	Dominate decision-making	Limited involvement
Maintenance	Active, balanced participation	Significant, equal contribution
Harvest and Post-Harvest	Supporting roles	Dominant in harvesting and processing
Decision Making	Control strategic management	Limited and consultative roles

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Gendered participation in rural Aceh clearly reflects a division of labour that privileges men in strategic and decision-making domains while assigning women to operational and maintenance roles. As shown in the table 1, women dominate physically demanding tasks such as planting, weeding, and post-harvest processing, whereas men control strategic management. This imbalance demonstrates that women's contributions, though quantitatively greater in fieldwork, translate into minimal influence over economic outcomes. Such asymmetry exemplifies what Woodward (2009) describes as symbolic invisibility, where essential labour becomes socially and institutionally unrecognized. As one female farmer from Central Aceh explained that she work every day in the field but her husband is the one who decided what and where to sell.

Such testimonies reflect deeply internalized cultural beliefs that normalize gendered divisions of roles. The notion that women's agricultural labour is merely an extension of domestic responsibility remains dominant across generations. A traditional leader from Bener Meriah confirmed this logic: "If women help their husbands in the fields, that's natural. They work for the family; the men are the ones responsible for production." (Traditional leader, Bener Meriah, 2025)

These cultural norms operate as mechanisms of exclusion, maintaining male authority in production systems and resource ownership. Formal institutional barriers further reinforce these unequal structures. Farmer organization regulations, for example, often require membership under the male head of the household, systematically excluding widows and female-headed households. Among the widowed female farmers interviewed, none were registered on farmer group membership lists, making them ineligible for capacity-building programs or public funding.

Researchers' field notes also recorded that women rarely spoke during farmer group meetings, even when present. They tended to sit at the back, whisper suggestions to their husbands, or leave early once domestic obligations arose. Meanwhile, men controlled not only discussions but also documentation and official sign-offs. Such observations highlight the persistence of indirect marginalization, in which socio-cultural

expectations restrict women's public voice despite their intensive labour participation.

This inequality is further reflected in control over value-added and profit-oriented economic activities. Men dominate marketing, pricing, and product distribution, the highest-value stages in agroforestry, while women, who perform the most time-intensive physical work, are excluded from economic decision circles. Resource ownership also mirrors patriarchal arrangements; land certificates, access to technology, and farmer training registration are primarily recorded in men's names. Data from the Central Aceh District Regional Development Planning Agency (2025) shows that only a small number of women registered as training participants, and even those who did, only a small number registered independently. The majority participated in the training through a partner substitution system.

Nevertheless, qualitative evidence also indicates shifting micro-patterns of gender roles in households with stronger female market literacy and technical capacity. These changes often occur when women manage coffee quality evaluation, online sales, or direct customer contact. In Takengon, for instance, a male farmer openly stated: "My wife knows better about coffee quality and the market; I just follow her decisions now." (Male Farmer, Central Aceh, 2025). Such cases suggest that socio-cultural flexibility exists and can be expanded through policy intervention. When women's expertise is institutionally acknowledged, domestic hierarchies gradually evolve into negotiated partnerships, indicating a potential shift toward gender equality in local economic systems.

Drawing from these field insights, gender inequality in Aceh's green economy is not limited to workload differentiation but extends to power asymmetry, visibility, and control over economic outcomes. Green economy initiatives, when detached from gender-critical frameworks, risk reinforcing patriarchal norms rather than dismantling them. At the same time, examples of role renegotiation among progressive families offer valuable evidence that cultural change is possible when exposure to markets, education, and innovation enables new understandings of partnership and authority.

Gender inequality in Aceh's green economy reflects the convergence of deep-rooted cultural norms, institutional limitations, and governance practices that collectively sustain male dominance. These constraints operate across three interrelated domains: religion-based leadership norms, inheritance systems, and legal recognition mechanisms. Each domain reproduces the unequal distribution of authority, resources, and decision-making power that limits women's agency in sustainable economic practices.

a. Religion-Based Leadership Norms

Aceh's social hierarchy is strongly defined by the fusion of customary and Islamic-based leadership models, both of which legitimize men's dominance in public decision-making. The concept of laki-laki sebagai kepala keluarga (men as heads of households) is deeply intertwined with notions of social respectability and moral order. Women's involvement in public activities,

especially in leadership or cooperative forums, is often constrained not by explicit prohibition but by the implicit belief that such visibility risks challenging moral boundaries.

Field interviews revealed widespread acceptance of these norms. Community leaders and religious elders often emphasized the importance of women "asking permission" from their husbands before participating in meetings or training sessions. One village head in Central Aceh remarked, "Women can go to meetings, but not too often; it's better if men represent the family." This line of thought reflects a pervasive moral logic that associates public engagement with male authority and domestic responsibility with female virtue.

Such religiously grounded cultural beliefs translate into moral surveillance that governs women's behaviour in the public sphere. Women reported feeling hesitant to speak or lead discussions, fearing social judgment for acting outside their expected roles. The internalization of these beliefs creates subtle, self-imposed barriers: women's absence from decision-making is not only institutional but also psychological, reinforced by cultural guilt associated with defying patriarchal norms. Consequently, green economy initiatives, though grounded in participatory ideals, struggle to counter traditional gender hierarchies without parallel shifts in cultural and religious discourse.

b. Inheritance Systems

The structure of land inheritance and ownership in Aceh constitutes a central mechanism sustaining women's economic marginalization. Despite women's active participation in agricultural production, land, which serves as the key determinant of financial authority, remains largely under male control. In most families, property is either patrilineally inherited or administered in the husband's name, reflecting customary and Islamic inheritance practices that prioritize male heirs (Hajad et al., 2025; Supraptiningsih et al., 2023).

Empirical data from field observations confirm this imbalance: agricultural plots were titled solely to men. Even when women contributed financially to land acquisition or inherited small plots from their parents, legal certification often defaulted to their husbands' names during administrative processing. As one land certification officer in Bener Meriah stated, "We just record the husband's name, that's the norm here." Such bureaucratic practices render women invisible in official documentation, effectively erasing their ownership claims and restricting access to agricultural credit or government support schemes that require proof of land rights.

The implications of this are twofold. First, women without land titles cannot participate in formal cooperatives as independent members, since membership typically requires ownership documentation. Second, the absence of land recognition restricts women from accessing inputs, training, or financing under programs like the Kartu Tani. Consequently, women function as de facto workers within production systems owned and controlled by men, reinforcing the link between inheritance patterns and structural inequality.

A small number of families adopting shared land titling demonstrate the transformative potential of joint ownership models. In households where land certificates list both spouses' names, female farmers reported higher involvement in financial planning and decision-making. However, such cases remain exceptional and largely the result of individual initiative rather than systemic policy enforcement.

c. Legal Recognition Mechanisms

Legal and bureaucratic frameworks in Aceh mirror and institutionalize these gendered power dynamics. Agricultural programs, extension services, and resource distribution systems often operate under the assumption that the male head of household represents the entire family's economic interests. As a result, women, particularly widows or unmarried women, lack formal recognition as farmers, despite being primary cultivators in practice.

Administrative procedures for registering farmer groups or cooperatives typically require participants to submit overwhelmingly male-dominated legal identifiers (such as citizen ID cards and land ownership letters). Leadership positions within cooperatives are likewise filled almost exclusively by men. Women's roles are limited to administrative support or ancillary functions, such as cooking or organizing meetings, symbolically present yet excluded from strategic control.

Regulatory language further contributes to gender invisibility by employing gender-neutral terminology that conceals asymmetries in resource access. Development programs implemented through local agricultural offices rarely disaggregate participation data by gender. This gender-blind governance approach results in policies that measure success by numeric participation but overlook whether women gain meaningful influence or empowerment.

Moreover, local administrative culture reinforces male leadership through its alignment with religious and customary governance systems. Village decision-making structures, known as *tuha peut* (Village Council), are dominated by male elders, with women rarely invited to represent the interests of farmers. This limited formal space for women at the governance level perpetuates exclusion at every subsequent policy level, from access to training and funding to production planning and benefit sharing.

However, emerging initiatives in Bener Meriah and Central Aceh demonstrate early efforts to reform these legal and institutional mechanisms. Programs such as joint land certification, quota-based representation in cooperatives, and flexible training schedules tailored to women's domestic responsibilities reflect a gradual shift towards inclusivity. While still in its infancy, these interventions demonstrate that institutional recognition, when guided by principles of gender-sensitive governance, can begin to dismantle long-standing biases.

2. Spectrum of Women's Roles in Green Economy Practices

Field findings in Aceh reveal a complex spectrum of women's roles across diverse green economy initiatives, from community-based agroforestry to centrally managed monoculture schemes. Women's participation ranges widely, from visible and active engagement in production,

processing, and distribution to near invisibility, confined to the domestic sphere and unrecognized by policies. This variation closely aligns with the community's cultural orientation, which shapes norms about authority, resource access, and decision-making power. Applying Douglas's Cultural Theory, we classify these patterns into four cultural types, each presenting distinct gender representations and impacts (see Table 2).

Table 3. Relationship Between Cultural Type and Gender Representation in the Green Economy

Cultural Orientation	Main Characteristics	Gender Representation	Impact On Women
Hierarchy	Rigid social structure, centralised authority	Men dominate decision-making	Women are marginalised in terms of access to training and resources
Egalitarianism	Social equality, and collectivity	Women are actively involved in the production process and decision-making	Equal roles in cooperatives and distribution of benefits
Individualism	Focuses on efficiency and profit	Women are valued for their direct economic contributions	No intervention for structural inequality
Fatalism	Apathy towards social change	Women are unaware of the potential for involvement	The gender status quo persists

Source: Processed by the authors with the framework from cultural theory (2025)

Table 2 illustrates how different cultural orientations shape gender dynamics in community participation. Hierarchical structures systematically marginalize women by restricting their access to training and decision-making, while egalitarian systems promote gender inclusion through shared roles and equitable benefit distribution. In contrast, individualistic orientations primarily recognize women for their economic productivity, without addressing structural inequalities, and fatalistic orientations perpetuate gender passivity and reinforce existing social hierarchies. First, hierarchy. In communities with hierarchical cultural orientations, rigid social stratification and centralized authority reinforce male dominance. Men predominantly control decision-making processes in green economy activities, from planning to resource allocation. Women's

roles are confined mainly to labour-intensive tasks such as planting and harvesting, while they are frequently excluded from formal forums, including training sessions, cooperative meetings, and planning deliberations. Government programs often perpetuate this dynamic by targeting family representatives, implicitly assumed to be men, thereby excluding women from vital access to training, capital, and information networks.

"We invite representatives of farming families to trainings, but usually men attend. Although women are permitted, they rarely participate as they are seen as non-decision makers." (Male, Department of Agriculture, Bener Meriah, 2025)

This aligns with Douglas's theory that hierarchical cultures maintain social order through clear role distinctions and authority deference, sustaining gendered divisions.

Second, egalitarianism. In contrast, communities with egalitarian cultural orientations emphasize social equality and collective welfare. Women in these settings actively engage not only in labour but also in strategic roles such as financial management, marketing, and cooperative governance. Access to resources, training, and decision-making is more balanced, with women's voices respected and influential in shaping outcomes.

Interviews within such cooperatives highlight women's leadership presence: "In our cooperative, all members have a voice, including women who manage finance and marketing." (Female member cooperative, Bener Meriah, 2025). This resonates with Douglas's notion that egalitarian cultures foster participatory engagement and minimize hierarchical divides, positioning the green economy as a conduit for social transformation.

Third, individualism. Communities or actors with an individualistic orientation prioritize market efficiency and economic gain. Women's involvement is recognized when they exhibit concrete economic contributions, such as producing value-added products or enhancing productivity, yet without addressing underlying structural inequalities. Inclusion is conditional on women proving their financial worth, absent institutional measures to mitigate cultural or social barriers. Douglas describes individualistic cultures as valuing self-reliance and competition, which can promote economic inclusion but often neglect issues of equity and social justice.

Fourth, fatalism. Fatalistic cultural settings resist social change, accepting existing power relations as immutable. Women internalize subordinate statuses, with minimal access to training, information, or leadership within green economy initiatives. Economic activities proceed as routine obligations rather than empowering engagements. A female farmer aptly summarized this resignation: "We work the fields, but men handle the program matters." (Female farmer, Central Aceh, 2024). Douglas associates fatalism with passivity and hopelessness, elucidating the persistence of entrenched gender inequities despite external development efforts.

These cultural types elucidate qualitative variations in women's roles, emphasizing how social frameworks shape access, agency, and recognition. Although policy documents frequently reference gender

and women, meaningful female participation in program formulation and implementation remains limited. The predominance of men in training, financing, and production networks highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive interventions aligned with local orientations to promote genuine gender equality in Aceh's green economy.

Integrating cultural theory with ecofeminism and political ecology deepens understanding of how gender, power, and culture intersect within Aceh's green economy framework. Cultural theory, as applied here, provides a lens to explain variations in social organization, hierarchical, egalitarian, individualistic, and fatalistic, that shape patterns of gender participation in environmental and economic initiatives. Yet, to fully grasp how these cultural orientations sustain inequalities, it is necessary to connect them with broader discourses on power and ecological relations illuminated by ecofeminist and political ecology perspectives.

From an ecofeminist standpoint, the hierarchical and fatalistic orientations observed in many communities do not only reflect rigid gender norms but also parallel structures of domination where women and nature are jointly subjugated under patriarchal and capitalist logics of control. This view resonates with Haraway's concept (2019) of situated knowledge, emphasizing women's lived ecological experiences as a vital source of epistemic insight often dismissed in formal governance arenas. Integrating this lens reveals that the exclusion of women from decision-making in resource management is not merely a product of cultural convention but an embodiment of deeper structural hierarchies embedded in development discourse and institutional design.

At the same time, a political ecology perspective, enriched by Rayner's socio-technical theory (1987), highlights how state-led green economy programs and technological interventions become contested spaces where cultural values, political interests, and power asymmetries converge. Even policies labelled as gender-inclusive can inadvertently reproduce inequality when framed within hierarchical assumptions that favour male authority and capitalist efficiency over local equity and ecological balance.

Synthesizing Douglas's cultural typology with ecofeminist and political ecology insights thus repositions gender inequality as an evolving interplay of patriarchy, policy, and environmental governance, underscoring the need for culturally grounded, gender-transformative green economy initiatives rooted in women's situated knowledge and ecological stewardship.

3. Gendered Participation and Power Relations in the Green Economy

This study found that women's participation in green economy programs is very minimal and can be grouped into different forms and levels of participation. The form of participation focuses on the types of activities carried out by women, such as agricultural land management (planting, maintenance, harvesting), waste and organic waste management (composting, creative recycling), hydroponic and organic farming activities, administrative work of farmer groups or cooperatives,

production and marketing of environmentally-based processed products, green entrepreneurship (eco-friendly products, waste crafts), environmental education and training, advocacy, socialization, ecological issue campaigns, participation in village programs (waste banks, organic farming), and involvement in village deliberation forums and environmental conservation. These forms of participation show that women participate in many green economic activities.

Meanwhile, the level of participation includes the depth of involvement, access, and barriers that women face in decision-making and leadership positions. Women's participation in the green economy can be broadly categorized into five distinct levels that reflect the range and depth of their engagement. At the basic level, women play a crucial role in technical activities such as planting, crop maintenance, harvesting, and organic waste management.

This level represents the most direct and intensive form of involvement and often entails the highest rate of participation. In Bener Meriah, women coffee farmers are particularly active in this technical domain, especially in bean sorting, drying, and post-harvest processing, which determine the final quality of the product. These activities are frequently conducted within domestic spaces or on small family-owned plots, making women's contributions often invisible or unacknowledged in the broader structure of the green economy.

Women's participation in green economy programs extends beyond technical work to include symbolic and administrative roles. At the symbolic and administrative level, women serve as members of farming groups, attend training sessions, and assist with administrative tasks such as recording harvest outputs, managing simple financial accounts, and organizing work schedules. For example, women farmers in Aceh participate in women's farming groups, cooperatives, and organic garden collectives, and their efforts strengthen social networks and solidarity among farmers. However, despite these contributions, men predominantly dominate strategic decision-making positions.

This limited influence is evident in agricultural training and farmer group activities, where women are present mainly as participants without equal opportunities to voice their opinions or take leadership roles. One female farmer from Bener Meriah Regency stated, "We participated in the training, but were only told to listen. The fathers still make the decisions." This highlights the gendered barriers women face in advancing beyond supportive roles to roles of decision-making and leadership within green economy initiatives. This distinction between forms and levels of participation underscores the structural challenges that constrain women's full engagement and leadership in sustainable agricultural practices.

As their involvement deepens, women begin to participate in planning and decision-making at the next level, where they contribute to production planning, financial management, and strategic choices that shape the direction and outcomes of green economy initiatives. This stage marks a significant step toward expanding agency,

though participation remains relatively limited. For example, some women members of cooperatives in Central Aceh have started to take part in annual planning meetings, provide input on sustainable land management, and help identify training priorities for female members. However, their involvement is often consultative in nature and does not yet translate into full decision-making power.

At a more advanced level, women are increasingly engaged in entrepreneurship and business management within the green economy, pioneering environmentally friendly enterprises and managing sustainable business models. Two female cooperative leaders in the coffee sector exemplify this. They operate under sustainability principles and meet international standards through organic and fair-trade certifications, ensuring that farmers and workers receive fair economic benefits. This level reflects a transformation from subsistence-oriented roles toward more strategic positions within the green value chain.

Finally, at the highest level, women participate in advocacy, leadership, and policy oversight. This progression reflects Douglas's cultural theory, where shifts from hierarchical to egalitarian orientations enable broader participation and collective agency. It also resonates with Scott's (1998) notion of "everyday forms of resistance," as women's increasing involvement challenges entrenched gender norms within institutional structures. From Bourdieu's perspective, this transformation indicates the reconfiguration of symbolic capital, where women convert social recognition and cultural legitimacy into leadership authority. Actively shaping environmental policies, leading community initiatives, and monitoring program implementation. This model captures not only the diversity of women's roles but also highlights their gradual transition from technical work to strategic leadership, providing a framework for assessing barriers and opportunities across different levels of participation. These initiatives are increasingly supported by the emergence of female activists within environmental NGOs and gender mainstreaming movements that advocate for gender-inclusive sustainable agriculture policies, green certifications, and improved access to land and resources for women (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Levels of Women's Participation in the Green Economy



4. Cultural Meanings, Symbolic Power, and Women's Agency: A Synthesis

Gender relations in green economy policies cannot be separated from the cultural structures underpinning social life. Drawing on Mary Douglas's

Cultural Theory and its further development by Aaron Wildavsky and Michael Thompson, this study explores how cultural models of hierarchy, egalitarianism, individualism, and fatalism influence authority, participation, and gender inclusion within Aceh's green economy framework. These orientations embody distinct moral orders that organize power relations and define who holds access to resources, how decisions are made, and how gendered identities are understood within environmental governance.

First, in hierarchical societies, male authority is normalized through customary laws and religious interpretations that position men as household heads and central actors in economic life. Green economy initiatives within this frame tend to preserve rather than challenge existing power structures, relegating women to supportive or symbolic roles. Second, egalitarian cultures value collective participation and open opportunities for women to engage in decision-making, management, and market access, illustrating how cultural alignment can enhance policy effectiveness. Third, in individualist contexts, gender inclusion is filtered through market logic: women gain recognition only insofar as they contribute to productivity, while structural inequalities, such as limited land ownership or training opportunities, remain unaddressed. Fourth, fatalistic orientations, meanwhile, sustain cultural passivity and reinforce women's exclusion, as entrenched norms and low expectations inhibit agency.

As a macro-structural framework, Douglas's Cultural Theory explains how societies institutionalize particular logics of order and control that frame the possibilities of gender inclusion. Yet, macro structures alone cannot capture the lived negotiations through which women navigate and subtly reshape those constraints. Here, James C. Scott's (2012) concept of domination and resistance illuminates the micro dimension of women's agency, revealing how Acehnese women exercise what Scott terms hidden transcripts: forms of resistance enacted not through open confrontation but through everyday acts of adaptation, such as women's participation in informal cooperatives, gardening groups, or religious gatherings represents these quiet strategies, vehicles through which they cultivate solidarity, claim access to resources, and gradually contest patriarchal norms from within.

To understand how such micro-strategies are restricted or enabled, Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) notion of symbolic power becomes essential. Symbolic systems, language, religious discourse, and everyday rituals naturalize male dominance by embedding authority within cultural meanings. Titles such as "head of the family," reinforced by both customary law and religious sanction, legitimize men's economic control while masking underlying inequalities. Through habitus, these symbolic orders are internalized, making gender subordination appear natural and inevitable. In Aceh's agroforestry and household economies, women's hands-on labor is recognized. Yet, their cognitive and strategic contributions remain invisible, an effect of symbolic domination that limits their recognition as full economic subjects.

Integrating these three perspectives creates a comprehensive analytical triad: (1) Douglas provides the macro-structural lens explaining how cultural order frames gender differentiation; (2) Scott reveals the micro-level dynamics of women's resistance and negotiated agency; and (3) Bourdieu exposes the symbolic mechanisms through which patriarchal dominance is reproduced and legitimized. Together, they demonstrate that gender inequality in the green economy is not merely a policy failure but a culturally and symbolically sustained process, embedded in both institutional structures and everyday social practices.

From a policy standpoint, this analysis argues that gender-responsive green economy frameworks must move beyond token inclusion toward structural transformation. Policies should aim to dismantle exclusionary norms, redistribute access to resources, and institutionalize meaningful participation of women in decision-making. Achieving this requires cultural reflexivity, a sustained recognition that culture is not a static obstacle but a dynamic arena for negotiation, adaptation, and redefinition of gender roles. When cultural structures, symbolic meanings, and women's agency are addressed holistically, the green economy can evolve into a platform for ecological sustainability, social justice, and genuine gender equality.

D. CONCLUSION

This study deepens our understanding of gendered environmental governance by applying Mary Douglas's Cultural Theory to analyze how hierarchical, egalitarian, individualistic, and fatalistic orientations shape women's recognition, participation, and access to power in Aceh's green economy. The research findings reveal that hierarchical worldviews deeply embedded in patriarchal-Islamic traditions continue to marginalize women by confining them to symbolic or informal roles. At the same time, men continue to hold control over decision-making and resource allocation.

In contrast, egalitarian communities, such as the women-led cooperatives in Meureubo and Woyla, demonstrate how collective organizations can overcome structural barriers and develop more inclusive models of environmental management. These local cases demonstrate that when cultural norms are more flexible, women gain access to leadership in farmer groups, ecotourism cooperatives, and sustainable production initiatives. Through the lens of Scott's (1998) concepts of domination and resistance and Bourdieu's (1990) notion of symbolic power, culture emerges not as a static backdrop but as a dynamic terrain of contestation in which women negotiate visibility, recognition, and authority.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this research provides actionable policy insights. For example, feminist solidarity networks in West Aceh formed around microcredit groups and herbal cultivation projects have become practical spaces for women to share ecological knowledge and strengthen their collective bargaining power. Similarly, grassroots activism led by youth and women's groups in coastal villages has advanced

mangrove restoration and sustainable livelihood programs that combine religious values with ecological management. These examples highlight that culturally grounded and gender-inclusive initiatives can foster local socio-ecological transformation. To support these developments, policies should ensure meaningful representation of women in decision-making forums, institutionalize local ecological knowledge in environmental governance, and design flexible institutional frameworks that accommodate women's social and domestic responsibilities. Such steps will not only increase policy inclusiveness but also strengthen the resilience of the local green economy.

However, this study has several limitations. As a qualitative case study, its findings are context-specific and may not capture the diversity of cultural and institutional realities across Indonesia. The researcher's positionality, whether as an academic observer or an outsider within some community networks, can also influence interpretations, particularly regarding local power dynamics and gender norms. Future studies should adopt a comparative and longitudinal approach to examine how shifting cultural meanings, policy reforms, and translocal exchanges shape women's environmental participation over time. Finally, while cultural typologies such as "hierarchical" or "fatalistic" are useful analytical tools, this study recognizes that culture is neither fixed nor homogeneous. Instead, it is a living and contested process that is continually reshaped by social interactions, religion, and development interventions. Understanding this fluidity is crucial for advancing gender equality and sustainability in diverse local contexts.

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