

Research Article

# A Gender-Responsive Policy Implementation Model for Strengthening Household Economies in the Bajo Community of Wakatobi

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the implementation of women's empowerment policies in the maritime Bajo community of Wakatobi Regency and to formulate a gender-responsive policy model based on local wisdom. The background of this study lies in the high rate of extreme poverty in Wakatobi, which reached 15.01 percent according to BPS (2022), as well as the strategic role of Bajo women who bear multiple burdens as household managers and family economic supporters. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Bajo women leaders, village officials, and non-governmental partners. The findings reveal that empowerment programs such as the Family Hope Program (PKH), micro-business skills training, and small-scale capital schemes have been implemented, yet remain largely consumptive-oriented and have not sufficiently enhanced sustainable capacity. The main barriers identified include low education levels, limited local government resources, and strong patriarchal culture, while supporting factors are the presence of local female leaders, social solidarity among women, and support from non-governmental organizations. Analysis using the Van Meter and Van Horn model produced a framework for a more gender-responsive policy implementation that emphasizes policy standard refinement, resource strengthening, participatory communication, active involvement of women, and adaptation to local wisdom. This study concludes that empowering Bajo women requires inclusive, participatory, and locally grounded policies to improve family welfare while strengthening the social position of women in coastal communities.

**Keywords:** Bajo; Gender Responsive; Maritime Community; Policy Implementation; Women's Empowerment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Bajo maritime community in Wakatobi Regency relies heavily on the sea as the primary source of livelihood. Their settlements, spread across Mola Raya and Kaledupa Island, are often referred to as pockets of extreme poverty. According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2022), the extreme poverty rate in Wakatobi reached 15.01 percent, far above the national average. This condition reflects the vulnerability of Bajo households, particularly given their limited access to productive resources such as capital, education, training, and market networks (Ngadi, 2016).

Within this challenging context, Bajo women hold a strategic role as the backbone of household economies. They not only manage domestic responsibilities but also actively participate in productive economic activities, ranging from processing marine products to developing family-based microenterprises. Previous studies have shown that women's involvement in economic activities contributes not only to household income but also to broader gender empowerment (Tresiana & Duadji, 2019; Tisnandya et al., 2021). Community-based initiatives such as skills training and support for small businesses have provided opportunities for women to expand their economic roles (Nurjaya et al., 2023; Mustofa & Oktaviana, 2023). Strengthening home-based industries has often become a key to improving household economic resilience (Kuncoro & Kadar, 2016). Despite this crucial role, Bajo women continue to face significant challenges. Many of them experience multiple roles as caregivers, income earners, and social actors, which often affect their psychological well-being (Darmayanti & Budarsa, 2021; Shindy et al., 2022). In addition, the persistence of patriarchal culture constrains their opportunities to engage in public decision-making, even though their economic contributions are substantial (Putri & Anzari, 2021; Djunaidah & Nurmalia, 2019).

Government programs that aim to empower women, such as training sessions and small-business facilitation, have not fully responded to the specific needs of coastal women. Structural barriers such as low levels of education, limited access to financial resources, and restrictive social norms further reinforce their marginal position in economic decision-making at both household and community levels (Rustina & Suharnis, 2023; Busthanul et al., 2023; Nurjaya et al., 2023). This situation illustrates that empowering Bajo women requires more than training or access to small-scale credit. It demands the development of inclusive and gender-sensitive policies that reflect their daily realities. Women's active participation in planning and decision-making processes is essential to improving their well-being and that of the Bajo community as a whole (Rumawas, 2019).

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of women in coastal development. Astuti and Casmana (2022) emphasized that although coastal women are actively involved in social and economic life, patriarchal structures frequently place them in a disadvantaged position. Rusyidi and Fedryansah (2019) also found that low levels of women's participation in development are rooted in their limited involvement in policy planning. However, much of the existing literature remains descriptive and has not yet provided a comprehensive analysis of policy implementation. Analyzing implementation is therefore essential to determine whether programs function as intended. It also enables the identification of barriers and supporting factors that influence the success of empowerment initiatives (Sarah & Yusri, 2021; Napitupulu & Suriadi, 2021). Strengthening this analytical perspective makes it possible to move beyond the description of problems toward the design of gender-responsive policy models that are grounded in local wisdom.

This study thus seeks to examine the extent to which women's empowerment policies in Bajo communities have been implemented according to their objectives, to identify both supporting and inhibiting factors, and to formulate a model of gender-responsive policy implementation that is rooted in the local wisdom of the Bajo community.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the implementation of women's empowerment policies in the maritime Bajo community of Wakatobi Regency. The research was conducted in two main Bajo settlements, namely Mola Raya and Kaledupa Island, which were selected because they represent the largest concentration of Bajo communities and are often identified as pockets of extreme poverty. The participants included various stakeholders to ensure a diversity of perspectives. From the community side, informants consisted of female leaders, housewives, and micro-entrepreneurs engaged in family-based businesses. From the government side, informants were drawn from village officials, customary leaders, and representatives from local government agencies responsible for women's empowerment and community economic development. In total, 18 key informants were interviewed in depth, complemented by two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) that involved a broader group of Bajo women.

Data collection relied on four primary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to capture the personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by Bajo women regarding empowerment policies. Second, FGDs were organized to elicit collective perspectives and cross-validate individual accounts. Third, participant observation was carried out by living among the Bajo community, documenting everyday practices, social interactions, and household economic dynamics. Finally, documentary analysis was used to review local regulations, government program reports, and official statistical data. The data were analyzed using the Van Meter and Van Horn policy implementation model, which highlights six variables: policy standards and objectives, resources, inter-organizational communication, characteristics of implementing agencies, disposition of implementers, and socio-economic and political conditions. The analysis followed the stages of data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretation, which allowed the identification of factors supporting or hindering policy implementation.

To ensure data validity, the study applied triangulation of sources and methods, comparing findings across interviews, FGDs, observations, and documentary evidence. In addition, member checking was conducted with several key informants to confirm that the interpretations aligned with their lived experiences.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex dynamic in the implementation of women's empowerment policies within the maritime Bajo community. On the one hand, the local government has sought to deliver various programs aimed at improving the welfare of coastal women, such as social assistance, skills training, and small-scale financial support. On the other hand, the effectiveness of these programs remains influenced by structural and social limitations embedded in the Bajo community. Field observations confirm that Bajo women function not only as beneficiaries but also as key agents who determine the sustainability of programs at the community level.

The discussion in this section is organized into four focal areas. The first is an analysis of policy implementation and the extent to which existing programs address the real needs of Bajo women. The second is an identification of barriers that slow or constrain policy effectiveness. The third is an exploration of supporting factors that encourage program success

despite limitations. The fourth is the formulation of a gender-responsive policy implementation model that is aligned with the socio-cultural context of the Bajo community.

### 3.1 Implementation of Women's Empowerment Policies in the Bajo Community

The findings indicate that the implementation of women's empowerment policies in Wakatobi Regency has been carried out through three key programs, namely the Family Hope Program (PKH), microenterprise skills training, and small-scale financial support schemes for coastal women. These programs have served as the government's primary instruments to reduce extreme poverty and improve the welfare of Bajo families. However, the effectiveness of these programs has varied, largely due to a mismatch between policy design and the specific needs of the maritime community.

PKH has helped poor households meet basic needs, particularly in children's education and food security. Nevertheless, the program remains short-term in nature, as it is not followed by strategies to strengthen household productive capacity. Microenterprise skills training was perceived as beneficial by participants, particularly in opening new insights into seafood processing and small-scale business opportunities. However, the limited number of participants and lack of continuity meant its overall impact remained modest. Meanwhile, small-scale financial schemes targeting coastal women were less effective, as most informants reported difficulties in fulfilling administrative requirements and lacked adequate financial literacy to access the funds.

**Table 1.** Bajo Women's Perceptions of Empowerment Programs in Wakatobi

Program Type	Positive Response (%)	Negative Response (%)	Notes
PKH Assistance	75	25	Helps meet basic needs, but not sustainable
Microenterprise Training	60	40	Useful, but not regular and limited in coverage
Small-Scale Financial Support	45	55	Limited access, difficult administrative requirements

Source: Bajo women's perceptions of the effectiveness of empowerment programs in Wakatobi (Data from interviews and FGDs, 2025).

The data in **Table 1**, shown that PKH received the highest positive response (75 percent) because it directly supported household consumption needs. However, the reliance on consumptive aid highlights the program's limitation in fostering economic independence. This finding is consistent with Ngadi (2016), who argued that coastal households tend to be trapped in structural poverty, where cash assistance only addresses symptoms without tackling the root causes. As one mother in Mola Raya expressed:

"The PKH support is indeed helpful, especially for the children's schooling. But in terms of work or business, nothing has changed. Once the aid is gone, we still have to find our own way to cover expenses." (Interview, Informant P3, 2025)

Microenterprise training was perceived positively by 60 percent of respondents as it provided practical skills. Yet, the lack of continuity and limited participant reach reduced its impact on household income. This supports the findings of Tresiana and Duadji (2019) and Tisnandya et al. (2021), who stressed that community-based training can only be effective when coupled with sustained mentoring and market access. Without such support, the training generates temporary skills but fails to ensure significant contributions to economic independence. As one participant noted:

"We enjoyed the training because it taught us how to process fish in a better way. But it only happened once. After that, there was no follow-up, so we were left unsure how to sell the products." (Interview, Informant P7, 2025)

The small-scale financial support program generated the highest negative responses (55 percent), particularly due to administrative barriers and the low financial literacy among Bajo women. This illustrates a policy gap where formal procedures fail to align with the capacity of intended beneficiaries. Nurjaya et al. (2023) and Mustofa and Oktaviana (2023) observed that women in coastal communities often struggle with rigid administrative requirements and the absence of technical support for business management. Similarly, Rustina and Suharnis (2023) emphasized that limited access to economic resources further entrenches women's marginalization in household decision-making. As one informant in Kaledupa explained:

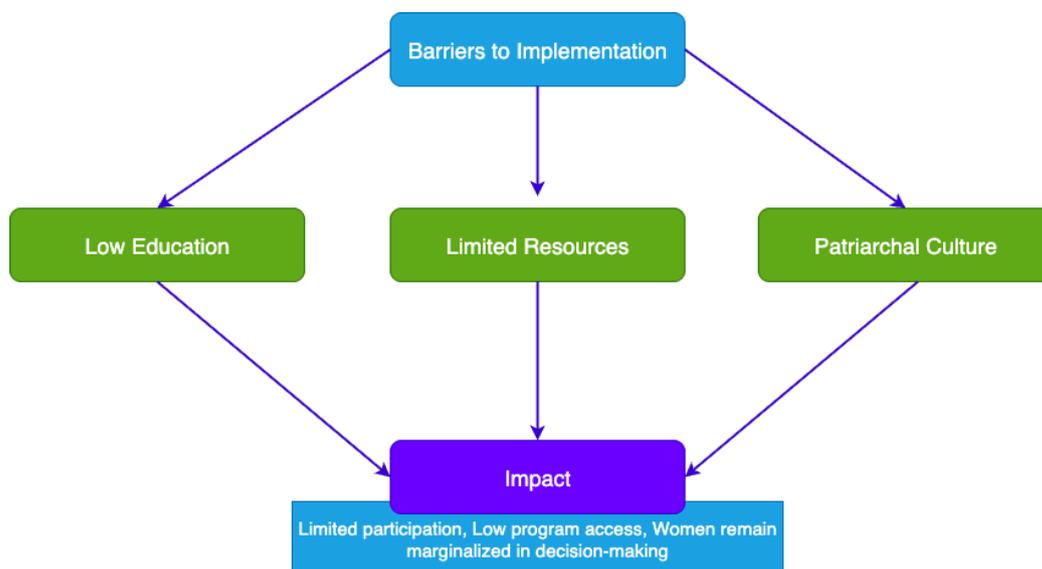
"We really wanted to apply for the loan, but we were asked for collateral and official business documents. We don't have those. In the end, we couldn't participate. The program seems only for those who already have bigger businesses." (Interview, Informant P12, 2025)

These findings demonstrate that policy design has yet to fully reflect the socio-economic realities of Bajo women. PKH alleviates consumption burdens but does not foster productive empowerment. Training opens opportunities but lacks sustainability. Financial support programs fail to reach the most vulnerable due to non-contextual administrative criteria. This resonates with Tresiana and Duadji (2019), who highlighted the importance of sustained training, and Mustofa and Oktaviana (2023), who noted that women in fishing communities are often excluded from financial schemes due to inflexible formalities. Therefore, the effectiveness of women's empowerment policies among the Bajo is determined by the extent to which government programs are tailored to the actual needs on the ground. As Kuncoro and Kadar (2016)

asserted, strengthening household economic empowerment requires policies to be grounded in the socio-cultural realities of the target community rather than relying on standardized models.

### 3.2 Barriers to Implementation

Field analysis shows that women's empowerment policies in Wakatobi have not fully met expectations due to several structural, social, and cultural barriers. These barriers arise from three main dimensions: education, local government resources, and patriarchal culture. The three are interrelated and together reinforce the vulnerability of Bajo women, limiting the effectiveness of policy implementation.



**Figure 1.** Barriers to the Implementation of Women's Empowerment Policies in the Bajo Community

**Figure 1**, illustrates three major barriers to the implementation of women's empowerment policies in the Bajo community, namely limited access to education, insufficient local government resources, and the persistence of patriarchal culture. These factors reinforce one another, making government-designed empowerment programs often unable to produce optimal results in practice. Limited education represents the most tangible barrier for Bajo women. Most informants had only completed elementary school, and some had not finished formal education at all. Low educational attainment hindered their ability to understand training materials or manage administrative documents required to access business capital. This condition significantly restricted their participation in empowerment programs. As one mother in Mola Raya explained:

“We wanted to join the training, but there were many terms we did not understand. Sometimes we just listened without asking questions, so the benefits were not really felt.” (Interview, Informant P5, 2025)

This finding aligns with Ngadi (2016), who emphasized that the low educational level of coastal communities has direct implications for their limited ability to utilize government programs.

The second barrier concerns the limited resources available to local government, both in terms of budget and personnel. Constrained budgets made program coverage very narrow, reaching only a small number of women in certain villages. As a result, there were disparities across regions in the distribution of program benefits. A village official in Kaledupa explained:

“The programs exist, but the number of participants is very limited. In our village, only one or two women could join. Others were excluded because the quota was too small.” (Interview, Informant P15, 2025)

This observation is consistent with Astuti and Casmana (2022), who noted that women's empowerment programs in coastal areas are often unevenly distributed due to government resource constraints, which reduces their broader impact.

The persistence of patriarchal culture in the Bajo community forms the most significant barrier to women's participation in empowerment programs. Many women were not permitted by their husbands or families to attend training sessions or village meetings because these activities were considered to interfere with domestic roles. Social norms that frame women only as supporters often cause their contributions in the public sphere to be overlooked. A female community leader expressed:

“When we wanted to join activities, we were often told it was not women's business. So there is hesitation, a fear of being seen as going against tradition or against our husbands.” (Interview, Informant P8, 2025)

This condition reinforces the findings of Rustina and Suharnis (2023) and Putri and Anzari (2021), who stated that patriarchal structures restrict women's opportunities to participate in empowerment programs, even though they play a vital role in sustaining household economies.

### 3.3 Supporting Factors

Although the implementation of women's empowerment policies in the Bajo community faces various barriers, there are also several supporting factors that strengthen program success. These factors arise from both internal community dynamics and external assistance. The findings indicate at least three key elements: the presence of local female leaders who serve as community mobilizers, social solidarity among Bajo women, and support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that actively assist coastal communities.

**Table 2.** Supporting Factors in the Implementation of Women's Empowerment in the Bajo Community

Supporting Factor	Concrete Example in the Field	Impact
Local female leaders	Leader of a fish-processing group	Increased participation of members
Social solidarity	Savings groups and joint businesses	Strengthened networks of economic support
NGO support	Marine craft training	Opened new market access

Source: Supporting factors for Bajo women's empowerment in strengthening family economies (Data from FGDs and observations, 2025).

Local female leaders have proven to be crucial drivers of participation. Their presence provides both inspiration and confidence for other women to engage in empowerment programs. As one leader of a fish-processing group in Mola Raya explained:

"When there are women leading, we feel more confident to participate. It feels like there is someone guiding us and representing women's voices." (Interview, Informant P2, 2025)

This finding is consistent with Tresiana and Duadji (2019), who emphasized that female leadership at the community level strengthens social networks and expands the influence of empowerment initiatives.

Social solidarity also plays a vital role in the Bajo community. Women form savings groups, rotating credit associations, and joint business ventures that function not only as economic platforms but also as spaces of mutual support. Within these groups, women help one another, whether by providing small loans or assisting with product marketing. As one participant explained:

"When we work together, it feels lighter. Some provide small amounts of capital, while others help sell the products in the market." (Interview, Informant P9, 2025)

This is consistent with Nurjaya et al. (2023), who underlined the importance of women-based solidarity groups in building the economic resilience of coastal households.

NGO support has come in the form of skills training and market facilitation. For instance, a marine craft training program organized by NGO partners opened opportunities for Bajo women to sell their products beyond Wakatobi. As one informant shared:

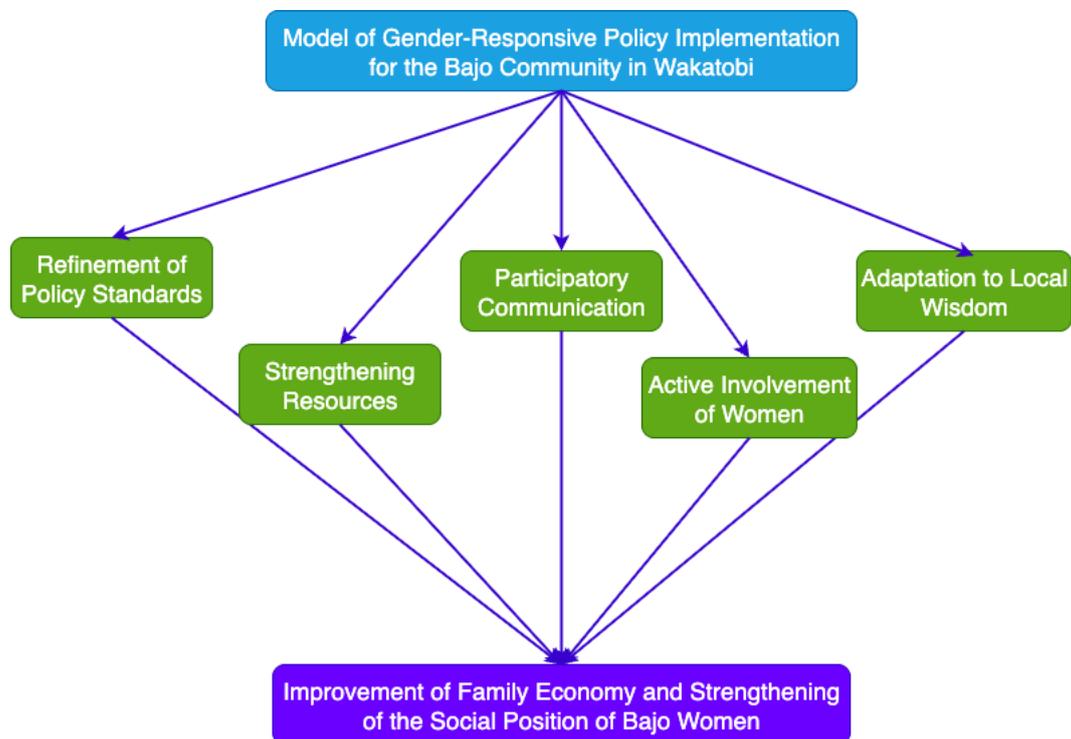
"We learned from the training organized by the NGO, and then they also helped us sell in the city. So our products became more widely known, not only here." (Interview, Informant P11, 2025)

This aligns with Mustofa and Oktaviana (2023), who emphasized that external support in the form of market networks and business facilitation is vital for the sustainability of women's empowerment in coastal areas.

### 3.4 Gender-Responsive Policy Implementation Model

Based on the findings and analysis using the Van Meter and Van Horn framework, a gender-responsive policy implementation model has been formulated that is relevant to the socio-cultural context of the Bajo community. This model is designed to bridge the gap between formal policy frameworks and the actual needs of coastal women.

The model emphasizes five key components. First, refining policy standards so that they are more aligned with the needs of maritime women, for instance by incorporating indicators of productive empowerment rather than focusing only on consumptive assistance. Second, strengthening resources through increased budget allocations, enhanced capacity of implementers, and sustainable technical support. Third, establishing participatory communication between government, community leaders, and Bajo women so that policies are not imposed from above but are the result of collective dialogue. Fourth, actively involving women in program planning, implementation, and evaluation so that their voices are genuinely represented in development processes. Fifth, adapting policies to local wisdom, for example by leveraging traditions of solidarity within the Bajo community and respecting their cultural values.



**Figure 2.** Gender-Responsive Policy Implementation Model for Bajo Women in Wakatobi

This model offers a paradigm shift from a top-down approach toward a participatory and contextual approach. By positioning women as key actors, policies are no longer framed merely as “assistance,” but instead create space for women to articulate their needs, participate in decision-making, and lead collective initiatives. A Bajo female leader emphasized the importance of their involvement in program design:

“When programs are created only by the government without asking us, they often do not fit. But when we join meetings and have the chance to speak, the results are more meaningful because they align with our lives.” (Interview, Informant P4, 2025)

This finding is consistent with Kuncoro and Kadar (2016), who argued that women’s empowerment can only succeed when policies are designed in accordance with the capacity and socio-cultural context of the target community. It also supports the view of Tresiana and Duadji (2019), who stressed that community-based empowerment and women’s participation are key to achieving gender equality and improving family welfare. Therefore, a gender-responsive policy implementation model rooted in local wisdom has the potential not only to increase household income but also to strengthen the social position of Bajo women within their community.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the implementation of women’s empowerment policies in the maritime Bajo community of Wakatobi Regency has taken place through various programs, such as social assistance, skills training, and small-scale financial schemes. However, the effectiveness of these programs remains limited, as most are oriented toward consumptive aid and do not address sustainable capacity building. The main barriers identified include women’s low levels of education, limited local government resources, and the dominance of patriarchal culture that restricts women’s participation in decision-making. At the same time, several supporting factors were found to strengthen empowerment processes, including the role of local female leaders as agents of change, social solidarity among women in developing collective businesses, and support from non-governmental organizations that provide training and market access. These factors demonstrate that empowerment potential can emerge from both internal community strengths and well-targeted external interventions. Based on the Van Meter and Van Horn model, a gender-responsive policy implementation framework was developed that emphasizes refining policy standards, strengthening resources, participatory communication, active involvement of women, and adaptation to local wisdom. This model is expected to guide Bajo women’s empowerment policies not only toward household economic improvement but also toward strengthening women’s social positions in their community. Thus, this study confirms that Bajo women’s empowerment requires inclusive, participatory, and locally grounded policies that can make tangible contributions to family welfare while reinforcing the foundations of socio-economic development in coastal areas. To strengthen the implementation of Bajo women’s empowerment policies, local governments should design more gender-responsive programs by focusing on enhancing productive capacity, expanding the coverage of training, and

providing accessible financial schemes. Local communities can reinforce the role of female leaders as agents of change through joint business groups, strengthen social solidarity through productive rotating savings groups and cooperatives, and integrate local wisdom into every training program. Non-governmental organizations are expected to facilitate market access, provide continuous mentoring, and build educational partnerships to improve literacy and digital skills among coastal women. Meanwhile, academics and researchers can contribute by developing multidisciplinary studies, evaluating the effectiveness of gender-responsive policy models, and providing comprehensive databases as evidence-based foundations for policy design.

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