

Reimagining Grassroots of Women's Leadership Epistemic Agency and Collective Power in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper reimagines grassroots women's leadership as an epistemic and collective process rooted in everyday struggles for justice, care, and survival. Drawing from field experiences and reflections compiled in *Her Place, Her Power: Growing Together for Women's Rights and Agency in Rural Communities*, this paper explores how women in rural Indonesia—living in forest-edge, agrarian, and coastal contexts—develop leadership not merely as positional authority but as *epistemic agency*: the power to create, interpret, and share knowledge emerging from lived realities.

Through participatory research and feminist-decolonial analysis, this study highlights how these women challenge exclusionary governance structures, negotiate recognition, and co-create local strategies for gender equality and environmental well-being. Their leadership is relational and transformative, combining care-based ethics, intergenerational solidarity, and community-based learning.

By situating their experiences within Indonesia's broader policy environment and the 2030 SDGs agenda, this paper argues that epistemic leadership offers a pathway toward gender-just and inclusive innovation. It calls for a rethinking of leadership development and knowledge systems that genuinely value local women as co-producers of transformative change.

Keywords: *grassroots women's leadership, epistemic agency, feminist decolonial approach, gender justice and inclusive innovation, rural Indonesia*

1. Introduction

Across Indonesia's rural landscapes—forest-edge hamlets, agrarian valleys, and coastal villages—women sustain everyday life through practices of care, negotiation, ecological stewardship, and collective problem-solving. However, these practices are rarely named as “leadership,” often treated as informal, auxiliary, or apolitical, and thus remain under-recognized by policy frameworks and mainstream development discourse. This paper reimagines grassroots women's leadership as an epistemic and collective process: not merely the holding of a position, but the power to create, interpret, and circulate knowledge grounded in lived realities, and to convert that knowledge into community action for justice and ecological well-being (Hendrastiti & Kusdinar, 2025).

This reframing responds to two persistent gaps. First, leadership initiatives in development and governance often privilege positional authority and individual attributes, measuring progress primarily by the number of women in formal roles. Such metrics can overlook how women lead *with* and *through* others—cultivating distributed capacity, enabling voice, and mediating conflict in ways that transform relationships and resource governance. Second, dominant knowledge systems tend to discount experiential and relational expertise—treating rural women's insight as “experience” rather than “evidence.” The result is double invisibility: women's labor is seen as social support rather than leadership, and their knowledge as anecdote rather than analysis. This paper positions epistemic leadership as a corrective: leadership as knowledge-making and knowledge-mobilizing that is inherently relational, care-based, and place-anchored (Hendrastiti et al., 2024; Hendrastiti & Kusujiarti, 2020).

This argument builds on field experiences and participatory workshops compiled in *Her Place, Her Power: Growing Together for Women's Rights and Agency in Rural Communities* (Hendrastiti & Kusdinar, 2025), facilitated with women's groups in Bengkulu, Trenggalek, and Sumba. These sites show women mobilizing shared memory, practical know-how, and relational ethics to name problems, test strategies, and align collective action on forest rehabilitation, coastal stewardship, livelihood

negotiation, and bodily autonomy. Rather than moving women toward pre-set institutional indicators, these cases show institutions being drawn toward community-held definitions of dignity, care, and ecological balance (Hendrastiti & Setiahari, 2022).

A feminist–decolonial lens is essential to interpreting these dynamics. Decolonial critiques ask who gets to define what counts as a problem, a solution, or a success; whose archives and temporalities are authorized; and how extractive systems govern knowledge (Escobar, 2018; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). Feminist scholarship focuses on power’s movement across bodies, households, customary arenas, markets, and state bureaucracies, making visible the everyday labor through which women hold communities together (Lugones, 2007; Mohanty, 2003). Reading these perspectives together illuminates the politics of recognition: leadership cannot be “inserted” into exclusionary structures without also contesting how those structures know and value. Accordingly, this paper uses epistemic agency to describe practices that (a) surface community categories of harm and hope, (b) convene collective interpretation across difference and generation, and (c) translate insights into iterative strategies such as negotiation, quiet refusal, public advocacy, and the redesign of daily routines (Fricker, 2007; Johnson & Lee, 2021; Santos, 2014).

The policy moment in Indonesia makes this inquiry timely. Recent shifts in village governance, social protection, and environmental regulation have opened channels for participation, while national development agendas are tied to the 2030 SDGs. However, formal participation does not automatically create epistemic participation. Without attention to how knowledge flows and whose knowledge is legible, consultation can become extractive, harvesting community data without shifting program design. By contrast, the cases highlighted here suggest what becomes possible when rural women are recognized as co-producers of knowledge and co-designers of interventions: rehabilitation plans that respect forest livelihood ecologies; conversations on bodily autonomy translated through local idioms and proverbs; and eco-tourism strategies that balance income with coastal stewardship (Crenshaw, 1989; Nussbaum, 2011).

This study is also animated by a parallel public conversation. At the recent KONEKSI dialogue,¹ many practitioners recognized that they regularly engage with groups aligning with what feminist scholarship calls “subaltern women’s groups,” yet lacked shared language that honors these groups’ epistemic authority. Naming matters: when the unlabelled is finally named, recognition deepens, and accountability follows—programs must listen differently, researchers must cite differently, and funders must design differently. The publication of *Unlabelled Movements: Finding the Subaltern Feminism of Pre-Reform Indonesia* (Hendrastiti & Irianto, 2025) helped crystallize this shift by providing language to what women have long enacted. This paper carries that impulse forward by tracing how naming, learning, and organizing travel together in contemporary rural sites.

In light of this context, this study addresses three questions:

1. How do rural Indonesian women enact epistemic leadership in everyday environmental and social governance?
2. Which practices— self-reflection, communication, negotiation, care, and documentation— convert individual insight into collective power?
3. How might policy, programs, and research be redesigned to recognize and resource epistemic leadership as a public good aligned with SDGs 5, 10, and 13?

Contribution and structure. Empirically, the paper documents how grassroots women’s epistemic labor remakes governance from below—often invisible to dashboards but decisive for outcomes. Conceptually, it elaborates epistemic leadership as a bridge between feminist epistemology and leadership studies. Practically, it points to tools—community-led monitoring and evaluation (MEL; Co-MEL), consent/data charters, vignettes as evidence, and iterative scorecards—that align evaluation with

¹ Koneksi, 2025. Konsultasi Kelompok Terfokus Mengenai Kesetaraan Gender, Program Kepemimpinan Kesetaraan Gender untuk mitra pengetahuan dan anggota Jaringan GEDSI, Prime Park Hotel, Magtaram – Lombok, 6 November 2025.

women's definitions of dignity and ecological health. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 develops the literature review and conceptual framework; Section 3 details the methodology; Section 4 presents the results and discussion through three site-based vignettes and a cross-cutting synthesis; and Section 5 offers the conclusion, including limitations and suggestions, in line with the BGSF proceeding format.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Feminist–Decolonial Perspectives and Epistemic Agency

Feminist and decolonial scholarship has long interrogated the ways in which knowledge and power are intertwined. Coloniality, as described by Quijano (2000) and elaborated by Lugones (2007), is not only an economic or political structure but also an epistemic regime that decides whose knowledge counts. This structure of power relegates women, especially those from rural or indigenous backgrounds, to the peripheries of recognition and authority. Within such systems, women's leadership tends to be misread as community service rather than governance, and their situated knowledges are dismissed as anecdotal (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2014).

Epistemic agency refers to the capacity of marginalized actors to produce, validate, and circulate knowledge about their own realities (Fricker, 2007). In feministdecolonial thought, this is not a purely individual capability but a relational one formed through social practice, care, and collective reflection (Escobar, 2018; Harding, 2016). As shown in *Her Place, Her Power* (Hendrastiti & Kusdinar, 2025), women in forest-edge, agrarian, and coastal areas transform their lived experience into community-based strategies for environmental justice and social well-being. Through storytelling, group negotiation, and collaborative decision-making, these women challenge epistemic hierarchies that privilege expert-driven or state-centered definitions of leadership (Hendrastiti et al., 2024; Mohanty, 2003)

Decolonizing epistemology therefore involves more than acknowledging local wisdom; it requires restructuring the conditions of knowledge production. Scholars such as Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012) and Escobar (2018) call this a *pluriversal* approach, in which multiple knowledge systems coexist without hierarchy. This approach parallels the present study's term epistemic leadership: a process through which grassroots women collectively interpret experience, reframe problems, and co-create solutions that reflect both cultural values and gender justice. Drawing on debates on epistemic justice in environmental governance (Gosselin & Gauquelin, 2025) and social work with Indigenous women (Johnstone & Lee, 2021), this paper understands epistemic agency as a relational and situated capacity to interpret, name, and act upon harm and hope within specific socio-ecological regimes.

2.2 Intersectionality and the Politics of Self

Intersectionality provides a second lens for understanding epistemic leadership. Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality to explain how systems of power, such as gender, race, class, and others, interlock to produce unique forms of subordination. In Indonesia's rural contexts, these intersections also include ecological location, customary identity, and spirituality (Hendrastiti & Setiahati, 2022). Women's leadership emerges at the crossing point of these structures, where social constraints coexist with relational networks that enable resilience and creativity.

In many Global South contexts, the politics of self cannot be detached from communal belonging. As Mohanty (2003) argues, autonomy and solidarity coexist in non-Western feminist practices, where empowerment is relational rather than individualistic. This relational ontology underpins leadership practices among women in Bengkulu, Trenggalek, and Sumba, who often express their agency through metaphors of nature—trees, rivers, or birds—representing interconnectedness and continuity (Hendrastiti & Kusdinar, 2025). Such representations articulate selfhood not as a boundary but as a shared process of care and accountability, challenging Western notions of leadership as individual charisma or authority (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Moreover, intersectional reflection enables women to reinterpret sexual identity and bodily autonomy within culturally grounded ethical frameworks. As seen in *Hidden Narratives* (Hendrastiti & Kusujarti, 2020), Sumba women reframe bodily autonomy not through confrontation but through the collective ethics of balance (*loda*), dignity, and mutual respect. This demonstrates how feminist–decolonial

leadership involves translating universal human-rights discourses into context-sensitive practices that preserve cultural integrity while expanding women's agency.

2.3 Capabilities, Collective Power, and Feminist Ethics of Care

Nussbaum's (2011) *capabilities approach* complements feminist-decolonial theory by situating leadership within the moral obligation to expand people's real freedoms. For rural women, these capabilities—bodily integrity, affiliation, and practical reasoning—are inseparable from collective well-being. Leadership thus becomes the act of expanding these capabilities for oneself and others through community-based initiatives, environmental restoration, and negotiations with power holders (Hendrastiti et al., 2024; Kabeer, 1999).

Feminist ethics of care further deepens this view. Leadership rooted in care practices disrupts hierarchical and extractive paradigms by emphasizing interdependence and mutual responsibility (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 2013). Within the study's sites, women's leadership emerges through the mundane yet transformative labor of listening, mediating, planting, and maintaining community harmony—actions often overlooked in formal policy discourses but essential for sustainable governance. Such ethics of care illustrate how epistemic leadership intertwines affective labor with political transformation (Escobar, 2018; Hendrastiti & Setiahadi, 2022).

Finally, collective power, as described in feminist movement literature (Batliwala, 2010), is not merely the aggregation of individual strengths but a synergy built through trust, shared analysis, and long-term cooperation. The vignettes from Bengkulu, Sumba, and Trenggalek exemplify this process: local women transform reflection into negotiation, and negotiation into advocacy, forming what could be called a *knowledge commons* of leadership. Recent empirical studies in Indonesia and South Africa confirm that women's empowerment and environmental stewardship are mutually reinforcing when women are recognized as political and ecological actors, not only as beneficiaries (Rahmania et al., 2025; Udo et al., 2025).

2.4 Conceptual Summary

Drawing on these strands, this study conceptualizes grassroots women's leadership as epistemic leadership: a transformative praxis combining feminist-decolonial knowledge, intersectional self-awareness, capability expansion, and the ethics of care. It departs from top-down empowerment paradigms by emphasizing how women's lived experiences produce theory and strategy simultaneously. In doing so, it contributes to the emerging discourse on epistemic justice and gender-transformative governance, offering a locally rooted yet globally resonant framework for inclusive innovation and policy reform in Indonesia's rural contexts.

3. Methodology

This study employs a feminist-decolonial qualitative methodology that centers rural women's lived experiences as sources of knowledge, interpretation, and theory building. Feminist ethnographers have long argued that research must illuminate how power and meaning are co-produced in everyday life, rather than extracted through detached observation (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Behar, 1996). In this spirit, the study treats women not as research subjects but as co-analysts whose reflections, metaphors, and daily strategies illuminate how leadership is enacted through relational and ecological practices. This methodological stance directly supports the paper's conceptual framing of epistemic leadership: the capacity of women to interpret their realities, generate shared knowledge, and guide collective action from within their communities.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a comparative, site-based qualitative design, drawing on long-term engagement with women's groups across three ecological and cultural contexts.

- 1) forest-edge communities in Bengkulu,
- 2) indigenous agrarian communities in Sumba, and
- 3) coastal stewardship communities in Trenggalek

These sites represent distinct socio-ecological conditions, yet reveal shared patterns in how women mobilize relational knowledge to sustain community well-being. Data were gathered between 2019 and 2024 through participatory workshops, reflective dialogues, small-group conversations, and field observations conducted during community meetings, training sessions, environmental activities, and ongoing collaborations between NGOs and local women's networks. This study is grounded in constructivist and relational epistemology, recognizing that knowledge emerges through interaction, shared interpretation, and situated experience (Harding, 2016). This aligns with decolonial research principles that emphasize the legitimacy of local epistemologies and challenge extractive traditions of data collection (Smith, 2012; Santos, 2014).

3.2 Research Sites and Participants

Each research site contributed unique sociocultural and ecological dynamics:

In Bengkulu (Desa Pal 8), women lead forest rehabilitation efforts, seedling management, and dialogue with plantation actors. Their leadership was expressed through ecological knowledge, quiet diplomacy, and daily care work embedded in the forest landscape. In Sumba (Paponggu hamlet), women negotiate gender norms, water scarcity, and customary authority. Their agency is articulated through ethical principles such as *loda* (balance/dignity), which guide everyday decisions and community harmony.

In Trenggalek (Taman Kili-Kili), East Java, women navigate coastal stewardship, eco-tourism development, and climate adaptation. Their leadership emerges through environmental know-how, negotiations with village officials, and shared practices of care. The participants included women aged late teens to their 60s, youth leaders, community facilitators, and customary figures. Although men occasionally participated in mixed activities, the analysis focuses on women's voices and meaning-making.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection unfolded through a layered, immersive ethnographic process consistent with feminist post-colonial methodologies, which emphasize relationality, reflexivity, and co-presence in the field (England, 1994; Rose, 1997). Instead of imposing predetermined techniques, the research blended storytelling, collective reflection, informal conversation, and shared activities, allowing women's knowledge to surface organically within the rhythms of everyday life. The core of this process consisted of participatory workshops in which women mapped landscapes, traced histories of environmental change, reflected on gendered experiences, and discussed strategies for negotiating with state and customary institutions. Such participatory approaches align with broader feminist traditions of valuing community dialogue and non-hierarchical knowledge creation (Cornwall, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Activities differed by site: in Bengkulu, forest access mapping and rehabilitation histories were central; in Sumba, dialogues on bodily autonomy were framed through local idioms and customary ethics, including spring water protection practices; and in Trenggalek, discussions focused on ecotourism, climate adaptation, and women's negotiation roles. These workshops were complemented by dialogue circles, intimate group discussions where women shared tensions, aspirations, contradictions, and emotional labor, often invisible in formal governance settings. Dialogue circles helped reveal relational dynamics, such as how women mediate conflicts, navigate hierarchical norms, and sustain solidarity.

In addition, the study incorporated numerous field talks, a core practice in feminist ethnography in which semi-structured conversations unfold informally during shared activities such as planting seedlings, collecting water, cooking, or walking to the coast. Field talks are recognized as a legitimate source of ethnographic knowledge because they reflect how people naturally theorize their lives in situ (Black, 2021). These conversations illuminated women's personal reflections, interpretations of leadership, and the ways in which they convert everyday practices into collective influence. Field observations further deepened the data by documenting women's actions in real-time—guiding eco-tourism guests, negotiating with middle-persons, participating in customary ceremonies, or tending communal spaces. Observational notes captured gestures, affective labor, relational cues, and ecological practices that formal interviews often miss (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Vignettes were constructed as analytical tools to synthesize key insights from these materials. Vignettes provide a concise, interpretive window into the convergence of experience, context, and agency. Their use is well-established in qualitative research, particularly for illustrating complex social processes and relational dynamics (Barter & Renold, 1999). The three vignettes representing Bengkulu, Sumba, and Trenggalek are presented in Section 4. Finally, data collection was supported by a review of community documents, including workshop notes, village meeting minutes, project materials, and prior publications, which helped triangulate narratives and contextualize the long-term evolution of women's leadership.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed an iterative, reflexive thematic approach, consistent with feminist and decolonial analytical traditions. The process began with immersion in field talks, observational notes, workshop transcripts, and community documents. Initial coding was inductive, tracing themes such as care, ecological expertise, negotiation strategies, relational ethics, and leadership dilemmas. Emphasis was placed on metaphors and idioms that reveal women's epistemic categories and interpretive frameworks. A cross-site comparison enabled the identification of convergences, such as distributed leadership, intergenerational learning, and relational ethics, and divergences shaped by ecological and customary contexts.

These themes were woven into narrative vignettes that preserve contextual complexity while offering analytical clarity (Spencer et al., 2003). Throughout the process, the author maintained a reflexive journal following feminist guidance on self-positioning and accountability in knowledge production (Pillow, 2003). This reflexivity helped surface interpretive tensions and mitigated potential bias arising from the dual role of the facilitator and researcher.

3.5 Positionality of the Researcher

The author's positionality as a scholar-activist, community facilitator, and long-time participant in feminist and grassroots networks shaped access, interpretation, and trust within each site. This insider-outsider position aligns with debates on relational ethnography, in which researchers navigate shifting identifications and belonging (Narayan, 1993). While this positionality enables a nuanced understanding of women's realities, it also demands sustained reflexivity to avoid reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge or overlooking subtle dynamics of power and conflict.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical practice follows feminist-decolonial principles of reciprocity, care, and community consent (Smith, 2012). Participants' names are anonymized where necessary, and sensitive discussions were conducted within culturally appropriate boundaries. The findings were shared with the communities through conversations and feedback sessions. Special attention was paid to customary ethics in Sumba, where discussions of gender, water, and dignity require cultural sensitivity.

3.7 Limitations

The study's depth arises from engagement with three specific sites; thus, the findings are not intended to represent all rural Indonesian women. The author's dual role may introduce interpretive bias, although reflexive documentation mitigates this risk. COVID-19 created temporal gaps in fieldwork in some areas. Nevertheless, sustained longitudinal engagement enhances the credibility and richness of insights on epistemic leadership.

4. Findings & Discussion: Epistemic Agency and Collective Power

Grassroots women's leadership in rural Indonesia emerges from lived experience, social intelligence, and the capacity to maintain relationships across household, community, and ecological spheres. Rather than formal titles, everyday practices demonstrate epistemic agency—the ability to generate, validate, and mobilize knowledge within culturally embedded contexts. The three vignettes below illustrate how this agency evolves into collective power, shaping local governance and environmental stewardship.

Vignette 1: Pal 8, Bengkulu - Forest Rehabilitation Knowledge

In Pal 8, women recognized the early signs of forest decline that threatened household water sources and forest products. Acting before any formal intervention, they organized small nurseries, mapped degraded areas, and negotiated with men to participate in rehabilitation work. Their leadership is expressed through ecological observations, care labor, and sustained coordination. This vignette demonstrates how women's environmental knowledge—often overlooked—becomes the basis for organized collective action.

Vignette 2: Sumba - Local Proverbs and Bodily Autonomy

In Paponggu Hamlet, Central Sumba, a circle of women used local proverbs and metaphorical storytelling to speak about bodily autonomy, relational harmony, and protection from violence. Through the reinterpretation of *adat* sayings, they generated a culturally grounded understanding of safety and dignity. Their approach is neither confrontational nor externally imposed; instead, it reflects symbolic knowledge-making rooted in local cosmology. This demonstrates how women construct feminist interpretations from within their own cultural frameworks.

Vignette 3: Taman Kili-Kili, Trenggalek, East Java - Eco-Tourism and Everyday Governance

In Taman Kili-Kili, even though subaltern women are marginalized, they became central actors in developing an ecotourism model designed to protect coastal habitats. They negotiated with village officials, male fishers, and NGOs on zoning rules and benefit distribution. Their leadership is visible in negotiations, hospitality, and a consistent presence in daily beach management. This vignette highlights how environmental stewardship becomes a pathway to confidence, voice, and everyday governance.

4.1 Bridging Analysis: Everyday Knowledge as Collective Power

Across the three sites, a shared pattern emerges: women lead through forms of knowledge undervalued in mainstream development narratives, such as care, ecological intuition, cultural literacy, and negotiation within intimate social spaces. These everyday knowledges act as epistemic resources, enabling women to speak, act, and influence community decisions. Their leadership is relational, emergent, and collective, challenging the notion that leadership must be formal or hierarchical. The vignettes illustrate how epistemic agency naturally grows into collective power as groups of women reshape environmental management, cultural discourse, and local governance.

This understanding reimagines grassroots women's leadership not as a position but as a continuous process of knowledge making, relationship building, and community-rooted action. This is similar to findings from feminist political ecology and intersectional climate adaptation research in Durban (Udo et al., 2025). The vignettes here show that rural women's adaptation and stewardship practices are grounded in situated, gendered knowledge that is rarely visible in formal governance metrics

5. Section 5. Conclusion: Reimagining Leadership Through Epistemic Agency and Collective Power

This study argues that grassroots women's leadership in rural Indonesia cannot be fully understood through conventional frameworks that emphasize formal authority, institutional positions, or individual charisma. Instead, leadership emerges from women's lived experiences, cultural literacies, and everyday ecological and social practices. By foregrounding epistemic agency—women's ability to generate, validate, and mobilize knowledge within their own sociocultural contexts—we view leadership not as a title, but as a process anchored in community care, negotiation, and collective survival.

The three vignettes presented in this paper demonstrate how women's grounded knowledge forms the foundation for broader community action. In Bengkulu, ecological intuition and care labor guided forest rehabilitation efforts. In Sumba, the reinterpretation of local proverbs opened culturally safe pathways to discuss bodily autonomy and relational dignity. In Trenggalek, long-term stewardship of the coastal landscape became a political entry point for negotiation, decision-making, and everyday governance. These cases illustrate that grassroots women's leadership is deeply relational, intersecting with ecological stewardship, cultural meaning-making, and sociopolitical negotiation.

Reimagining leadership through this lens reveals two key insights. *First*, women's knowledge—often dismissed as informal or domestic—constitutes a legitimate epistemic resource that shapes community decisions, environmental management, and shared moral frameworks. *Second*, when women collectively articulate and act upon this knowledge, they generate collective power that subtly restructures local governance. This power does not always manifest through confrontational activism. Instead, it grows through cooperation, persistence, relational trust, and the ability to bridge household, community, and ecological domains.

For feminist scholars, this perspective enriches the conversation on agency by expanding the analytical focus beyond resistance or overt political action. For development practitioners, it challenges the assumption that leadership must be formalized to be effective. Recognizing grassroots women's epistemic agency offers a more inclusive and culturally grounded approach to understanding and supporting gendered leadership in rural contexts. Ultimately, reimagining grassroots women's leadership requires recognizing that knowledge, care, and community-rooted practices are central to social and ecological resilience, not peripheral. By valuing these forms of agency, we acknowledge the powerful, often unseen leadership that rural Indonesian women enact every day—quietly transforming their communities from the ground up.

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