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# Realizing Gender Equality in Coastal Areas: Conservation of Critical Land and Empowerment of Women

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#### Abstract

The conversion of mangrove into shrimp ponds occurred in the coastal area of Kampung Beting, Pantai Bahagia Village, Bekasi Regency, West Java Province, Indonesia in the period 1990-2010. High income from shrimp ponds makes people ignore the ecological functions of mangrove forests, one of which is to prevent abrasion. However, since 2010, the destruction of hundreds of hectares of mangrove forests, worsened by climate change that hits almost the whole world, especially island countries like Indonesia, make the shrimp ponds in Pantai Bahagia Village submerged with sea water. Now, not only the shrimp ponds as their major income has disappeared, but also their living space is also threatened by severe abrasion. Gender inequality and the marginalized role of coastal women also make the socio-economic conditions of the community become worse. This study observes the role of women in Pantai Bahagia Village in responding to environmental and socioeconomic problems in their area. This study uses a phenomenological approach, data is collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the study show that women's empowerment plays a role in conserving critical land. Women's responses to environmental problems in their area include: 1) they create changes in women's awareness and behavior as an effort to repair and restore damaged mangrove land, and 2) there are activities carried out by women in protecting mangrove plants. Women's responses to socioeconomic problems include 1) women's active involvement in productive economic activities. 2) Utilization of nontimber mangrove products into processed food and crafts. Finally, this study recommends a concept to address critical coastal land issues, namely by involving women in various activities, both nature conservation and empowerment activities.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Coastal Areas, Climate Change, Women's Empowerment, Green Social Work

#### Introduction

Land conversion occurs in all coastal areas in the world (Kotta et al., 2020; Wu & Barrett, 2022), this change began in the late 19th century and reached its peak in the mid-20th century. Uncontrolled intensification of socio-economic activities (Tiando et al., 2021) will cause environmental damage and impact on the vulnerabilities (Haryani et al., 2019; Parwati et al., 2022; Prosser et al., 2019) faced by society. Some researchers even use the term fragile area (Xu et al., 2016) in analogy to how big the threat faced by coastal areas is.

One of the areas where land conversion has occurred and has had a negative impact (Maulani et al., 2021; Suwargana & Haranugraha, 2017) for the community has occurred in the coastal area of Kampung Beting, Pantai Bahagia Village, Bekasi Regency. From what was once a mangrove area, it has turned into a fish or shrimp pond area. Researchers use satellite imagery to describe conditions over the past two decades:

2001 2011 2022

Figure 1. 2001, 2011 and 2022 Satellite Imagery of Beting Village, Pantai Bahagia Village, Muaragembong District, Bekasi Regency, West Java Province, Indonesia (Source: Google Earth, 2023)

When viewed using satellite imagery and local government statements, there are two serious phenomena (Krismono & Pranowo, 2019; Pemkab Bekasi, 2022) that need attention. First, in 2001 there was a land conversion which was originally a mangrove forest and turned into fish or shrimp ponds which are the livelihood of the village community. This phenomenon occurred during the period 2001 to 2011's. Promising income motivates people to convert without considering the upcoming effects. Then in 2011, there was a loss of pond area which has now turned into the sea. It is estimated that 93% of mangrove area has been converted to its use. Second, after 2011 the community gradually began to feel the negative impact of the land conversion. Until now, all areas that used to be ponds have turned into seas and caused people to lose their livelihoods. In fact, not only losing their livelihood, the community is also faced with land damage and even threatens the sustainability of their lives.

Based on the documentation and observation results that have been conducted by researchers, a relationship was also found (Afryadi et al., 2022; Swata et al., 2015) between land conversion and a decrease in community income. Initially, the land that was converted into ponds massively provided large income to the community. Gradually, when the ponds were damaged by the tidal waves, people's income slowly decreased. The correlation of decreased land use with people's income can be seen as follows figure 1.

Environmental problems indirectly have an impact on reducing residents' income and also have an impact on community social activities. Low income causes other social problems such as divorce, domestic violence, malnutrition, and displaced people.

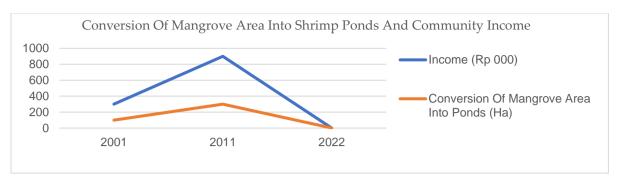


Figure 2. Diagram of the Amount of Land Conversion and Community Income (Source: Research Processed Data, 2023)

Based on the facts above, this research offers a novelty by looking at what is the role of women in Pantai Bahagia Village in responding to environmental and socio-economic problems in their area? Several previous studies have focused on studying women and solving environmental problems (Nastabilla et al., 2022; Prakash et al., 2022; Srinath, 2008) and there are even studies that use the term green social worker (Setiawan & Wismayanti, 2023) on articles that talk about women's empowerment and climate change. This research offers a novelty in seeing the role of women in responding to socio-economic problems in coastal areas.

# Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research method (Neubauer et al., 2019) with a constructivist paradigm. In the process of looking at an existing social condition, researchers use a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach is a research that is interested in analyzing and describing the experience of an individual phenomenon in everyday life. This approach uses two ways as proposed by Groenewald (2004), namely first, understanding social phenomena through data that emerges from each participant or people involved in this case, namely women who are in Pantai Bahagia Village. Then second, researchers are intensely involved in the data collection process. These two steps become the initial view of the researcher in defining the research problem which is then combined with the concepts that have been collected by the researcher.

The data collection technique in this study was through three techniques (Silverman & Patterson, 2022), including observation, interviews and documentation. First, observations were made to see the actual environmental and living conditions of women in Pantai Bahagia Village. Researchers used observation techniques to see the behaviors, activities, interactions and actions taken by the participants. The second data collection technique was interviews, in which researchers selected the informants using purposive sampling with the head of the Kebaya Group (KK) as the initial key informant. This is due to the depth of the information it has. Furthermore, the researchers also interviewed some members of the Tourism Awareness Group (KSW), Local Communities (ML), to the private sector (S) as representatives of existing assistance. In terms of quantity, the number of informants in the study was 19 people consisting of 10 KSW people, 5 ML people, and 4 S people.

This research was conducted in Kampung Beting Village, Pantai Bahagia Village, Bekasi Regency, West Java Province, Indonesia. This location was chosen by the researchers due to land conversion in the northern coastal area which reached more than 90%. Until finally, the conversion of land from mangrove areas to ponds causes abrasion and endangers people's livelihoods. This research was conducted for three months, namely the period March-May 2023. The following is a map of the research locations:



Figure 3. Study maps area (Source: Google, 2023)

Data analysis starts from the moment the research is decided on the topic and ideas of the research itself. As a qualitative research, the analysis process is carried out at the end, there are at least five stages of data analysis (Bogdan & Steven, 1992), namely recording, horizonalization, clustering of meaning, interpretation, and writing reports. Starting with recording various kinds of field findings and also the data found, then the next stage is horizonalization by combining and categorizing the data obtained into clusters of relevant issues. Furthermore, the cluster of meaning stage is the stage of classifying data that has been sorted based on the sequence and research objectives. The last two stages are interpretation as a form of translating and sorting data for later writing reports.

#### Results

# Pantai Bahagia Village That's Not 'Happy' (Bahagia) Anymore

Pantai Bahagia Village is one (BPS, 2021) of six villages in the Muaragembong District. It has a population of 7,210 people with a growth rate of 0.66 percent over the last two decades. This area is actually categorized as protected forest as stipulated by Decree Number 92 Number 92/UM/54 of 1954 by the Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Indonesia, but based on research findings, this area has experienced quite severe degradation (Pamungkas et al., 2020). 255.22 ha/year.

In the early 2000s, the Pantai Bahagia Village area had a nickname, Dollar Village or Kampong Dollar. Why is that? The major income of the village community at that time was fish farming, with a fairly good selling price. In fact, based on the local community statement, the net income that can be obtained from pond cultivation can reach up to 1 million rupiah per day. The magnitude of this figure makes this area nicknamed Kampong Dollars. The amount of profit received has encouraged the community to change the function of the mangrove area into ponds. In fact, the area of mangrove plants in this area had to be converted into ponds by local residents. It didn't take long; a decade later, 2,723 ha of ponds in Pantai Bahagia Village (Oktaviani et al., 2019) were not being utilized. Based on the results of the interviews, the non-utilization of the land was caused by the loss of the seeds in the ponds when the high tide came. One of the causes of this condition is that there are no longer mangrove areas as a safety belt for coastal areas.

#### **Women's Responses to Environmental Problems**

It started with a phenomenon of land conversion which had a negative impact on the livelihoods of village communities (Interview with ML, 2023), so that the livelihoods of the residents changed from fish farmers to fishermen. This change in livelihood has reduced the productive activities of women in this village where fishing activities are dominated by men rather than women. This fact makes the role of women increasingly shifted to the domestic sector alone. As stated by the following informants:

"After the change in livelihood, what used to be farmers are now fishermen. Then automatically the pattern of people's lives changes. the high intensity of going to sea, uncertain income causes changes in the stability of people's income. some residents even experienced domestic violence, some also had affairs, which led to divorce." (Interview with ML, 2023)

Therefore, researchers conducted observations and interviews related to women's responses to environmental problems in their area. Field findings show changes in women's behavior in efforts to repair and restore critical land. This awareness process occurs through several stages including:

participating in training and socialization of critical land conservation carried out by stakeholders. After a community need assessment (Alarte, 2022) was carried out by local stakeholders, one of the causes for the emergence of personal problems in Pantai Bahagia Village was the limited role of women in supporting family sustainable livelihoods. From these findings, there are several parties that provide training and outreach to increase the capacity and role of women not only in conserving critical lands, but also in increasing their capacity to support sustainable livelihoods for their families (Interview with S, 2023). One of these training and outreach was carried out by PT. Cikarang Listrindo Tbk. in collaboration with the local government. Private involvement, PT. Cikarang Listrindo Tbk. is in line with research on the CSR model that applies in Indonesia, by involving the local context and actor relations (Widhagdha, Santosa, Wardani, Retnaningsih, & Kartono, 2022).

"After feeling the negative impact of land conversion, the community conveyed the problem to the appropriate government. After that, a lot of help came. Such as training in the management of mangrove plants, training in the use of preparations made from local potential, some also provide equipment assistance. even PT Cikarang Listrindo made an area that was mutually agreed upon as a mangrove conservation area" (Interview with S, 2023)

The awareness process does not stop on socialization and training, the next step is to start and practice direct planting from their own land. All residents of Pantai Bahagia Village own land that has been converted into ponds. These ponds are currently unused, so that they will submerge under the sea when the tide comes. Looking at this fact, a group of women who had been given training initiated the mangroves planting (Interview with KK, 2023) in abandoned ponds. This process did not go smoothly, many people mocked the process of replanting the mangroves at the beginning. The persistence of women in conservation efforts is slowly showing results, the mangrove land is slowly starting to turn green and their real work is being appreciated by various parties and the village community is starting to follow them.

The next stage is to make the process of planting mangroves one of the visit's advantages. After more and more people became aware of the restoration of the function of mangrove land in coastal areas, many visitors wanted to learn about the success of the implementation of returning critical land from the Pantai Bahagia Village. The women's group involved in the process of restoring the function of this critical land invites every visitor who comes to the village to participate in the planting process. Every visitor is required to immediately plant mangroves in a predetermined area. Until now, it is estimated that more than 500,000 mangrove plants (Interview with KK, 2023) have been planted either by the local community or every visitor who attended the village.

The second response of women to environmental problems is the activities carried out by women in sowing and caring for mangrove plants. The initial stage of restoring the damaged area is the availability of mangrove plants for planting. A group of women who are members of the Kebaya Group in Pantai Bahagia Village independently sow mangrove plants. The community thinks that those who can repair this critical land are themselves and do not expect much from outsiders (Interview with KSW, 2023). One of the actions is sowing the mangrove plants themselves so that every citizen who wants to plant mangroves is available and reduce the cost of procuring mangrove seeds.

The next step is to keep the mangrove plants growing and not be swept away by tidal waves. The women's group who are members of the Kebaya Group ensure that the planting plan is placed according to the master plan for the area of returning critical area. Furthermore, this women's group ensures the maintenance of various mangrove plant needs such as protective bamboo, and also replaces dead mangrove seeds. This treatment is carried out regularly for once a week by the Kebaya Group.

The satellite imagery seen can provide strong evidence that women's responses to environmental problems can support the conservation of critical land into sustainable mangrove areas. The following is a satellite imagery showing that the mangrove conservation area that was previously lost is now expanding:

2001 2011 Mangrove 2022







Figure 4. Satellite Imagery of Expanding Mangrove Areas (Source: Google Earth, 2023)

# **Women's Response to Socio-Economic Problems**

Derivative problems that arise due to land conversion which causes loss of people's livelihoods are also felt in the social and economic sectors. Social problems arose due to the decline in women's productive activities in Pantai Bahagia Village, including infidelity, divorce, and the family debts in this area. Furthermore, economic problems are felt by the community due to the loss of livelihoods, previously fish farmers are now fishermen. Income as a fisherman is not as big as being a fish farmer and there is also no guarantee of coming home with lots of catches and sometimes even no results at all.

First, women's response to the social problems they face is the active involvement of women in productive activities, this is in line with research by Truong Thi, L (2022) which states that women's empowerment has a strong impact on increasing productivity. Initially, there were only five women involved in various productive activities. This is due to the fact that at first this productive activity was only limited to replanting mangrove in the yards of the house. So there are not many enthusiasts of this activity. Then productive activities continue by processing high-value products made from mangrove plants. The resulting product is then promoted by people involved in it, both the government, non-governmental organizations and even the private sector. The massive promotion carried out, as well as the uniqueness of this product, has made the interest in this processed mangrove increasingly high. Once the economic benefits are gained, the community involved will increase. Until now there are 38 women involved in group productive activities.

"In the past, I was considered an insane person, because I planted mangroves. We carried out mangrove planting activities with 5 other people. Now, there are many who are involved. It can reach 38 people. Many are involved because the benefits have been seen, both from an environmental perspective. and also the economy." (Interview with KSW, 2023)

The intensity of group activities in responding to existing social problems is carried out at least once a week to monitor the mangrove seeds that have been planted. If there are damaged mangrove seedlings, the damage must be replaced or repaired immediately. In addition, the activity of making processed mangrove products is carried out by groups on average twice a week or even every day if there are quite a lot of product orders.

The second is women's response to the economic problems they face. The Women's Group in Pantai Bahagia Village through the Kebaya Group can utilize non-timber mangrove products to make processed food and crafts. This production activity was carried out starting in 2019 starting with trail and error then assistance was carried out by the CSR Department of PT. Cikarang Listrindo Tbk. to participate in various product management training activities to its packaging. Currently, several processed food products that utilize non-timber mangrove plant products include mangrove leaf chips, mangrove lunkhead, *umpet* peanuts, and mangrove leaf sticks. To make it easier for these processed products to be accepted by the general public, assistance is also provided until these processed products obtain halal certification and a certificate of permit for Household Industry Products (PIRT).

In the processed food production process, the women's group consists of 20 middle-aged women. Production is carried out manually by looking for raw materials in mangrove plantations to be processed, cooked, and finally packed. Every month this group can generate a turnover of IDR 20,000,000 from product sales. The profit sharing received by the members of this women's group is that for each product produced in one day, the number of kilograms is calculated and then multiplied by Rp. 25,000 to Rp.

35,000 according to the type of product. On average, the production of processed food every day will produce 10 kg of processed food. So that the average increase in income for group members from those who previously had no income at all can get an average of IDR 1,000,000 to IDR 2,000,000 every month.

Apart from processed food products, there are also handicraft products that are produced, batik cloth with natural dyes utilizing mangrove fruit plants of the Rhizophota Stylosa species. For each batik cloth produced by this group, the value is IDR 350,000. This batik is synonymous with brown because the brown color is the original color of natural dyes produced from mangrove fruit tannins.

Based on the researcher's analysis (Interview with KK, 2023) it shows that there is an increase in income without conversion into a pond area. The following is a diagram of increasing people's income through mangrove conservation activities, processed food production and production of natural colored batik:

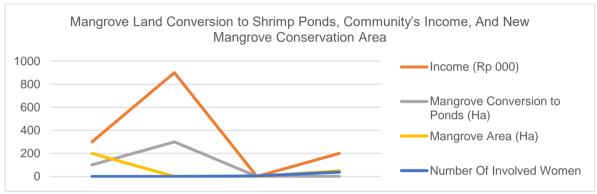


Figure 5. Diagram of Reduced Amount of Land Conversion and Community Income (Source: Research Processed Data, 2023)

In the graph above, it can be seen that the area of mangroves being conserved has slowly increased from year to year and the conversion of mangroves into ponds has stopped, besides that, the involvement of women has also increased from year to year, and this has implications for increasing family incomes in coastal areas.

#### **Discussion**

The concept of patriarchy in the Asian region is still often found (Arcand & Wagner, 2016; Atahau et al., 2021; Lindberg et al., 2014; Shalihin & Firdaus, 2019; Stephens et al., 2018), where the role of men is more dominant than women. Likewise in the northern coastal area of Java Island (Malau, 2015; Nanang Hasan Susanto, 2015; Prakash et al., 2022; Srinath, 2008), Pantai Bahagia Village, Muaragembong District, Bekasi Regency. The role of women is still often found in household chores such as taking care of children, cooking, washing and cleaning the house. Moreover, the work that is the main source of income for the people of this village is fishing. Where, fishing activities that require a lot of energy are not suitable for women's physical condition. Apart from being active in the scope of domestic household work, women are also faced with the dilemma of environmental damage that has hit their area. When the high tide arrives, these women must be prepared to clean up and secure valuables so that they are not carried away by the tidal wave.

Women's responses when facing a problem (Afrizal & Hardika Legiani, 2020; Rahmi & Putra, 2020; Sulistyowati, 2021; Truong Thi, 2022; Utami et al., 2020; Widodo, 2020) can be grouped into three parts. First, there are those who surrender to the situation. Second, there are those who have the desire to make changes but don't have the courage. Third, there are also those who have the desire to make changes and succeed in making changes. This study looks at which responses occurred in the case of women in Pantai Bahagia Village.

The results of observations and interviews show that women's responses to the environmental, social and economic problems they face are having the desire to make changes and are considered successful in making these changes. The desire to solve environmental problems is reflected in the awareness of women to carry out real change activities by planting and caring for mangrove plants. For

the social aspect, awareness is illustrated by the increasing number of membership of tourism awareness groups in this region. while in the economic aspect, there are productive activities in the form of empowering women through processed local products. Meanwhile, conceptually, related to women's responses is explained as follows: First, women's response to environmental problems, and second is women's response to socio-economic problems. In the first response it shows that: 1) there are some changes in women's behavior in an effort to repair and restore damaged areas. This condition is indicated by a) changes in women's behavior in an effort to repair and restore degraded land. Then, after an awareness-raising process in the form of socialization and training, the women in this area b) started and directly practiced planting from their own yards. Finally, in changing women's behavior, c) making the process of planting mangroves one of the visit packages. Furthermore, the second woman's response to environmental problems is 2) there are activities carried out by women in protecting mangrove plants. These activities are divided into several activities including a) the initial stage of returning critical land is the availability of mangrove plants for planting and b) keeping mangrove plants growing and not being swept away by tidal waves..

Meanwhile, women's responses to social problems include 1) there is active involvement of women in productive economic activities. These activities were divided into two activities, namely a) Initially, there were only 5 women involved in various productive activities, until now there were 38 women involved in group productive activities. Then the next activity is b) the intensity of group activities in responding to existing social problems is carried out at least once a week to monitor the mangrove seeds that have been planted. The second response to economic problems includes 2) utilization of non-timber mangrove products into processed food and crafts. In the form of activities in the form of an average increase in income for group members from the previous 0 rupiah, they can earn 1.5 million each month.

Finally, the discussion in this article found that women's empowerment activities in the use of processed mangrove products can provide income for the community and improve sustainable livelihoods for families living in coastal areas. Apart from providing income, the community is also directly involved in the process of returning land functions and preserving mangroves.

# Conclusion and Suggestions Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that women play a role in conserving critical land through women's empowerment activities. Women's responses to environmental problems in their area include: 1) changes in women's attitudes and behavior in an effort to repair and restore damaged land, and 2) activities undertaken by women in protecting mangrove plants. Women's responses to socio-economic problems include 1) there is active involvement of women in productive economic activities. 2) Utilization of non-timber mangrove products into processed food and crafts. Finally, this study recommends a simple concept to address critical coastal land issues, by involving women in various activities, both nature conservation and empowerment activities. So that gender equality will appear in various aspects such as economic, environmental, and social. For the economic aspect, women will get additional income from empowerment activities. Environmental aspect, involving women in the process of nature conservation. Finally, for the social aspect, women are involved in various decision-making in society.

# Suggestions

This research provides recommendations on the importance of increasing the capacity and role of women, not only in conserving critical land in coastal areas, but also in increasing the sustainable livelihoods for families. More in-depth research on women's relations in the social system of society is still needed in order to reveal a bigger role for women to enhance efforts to preserve coastal areas as well as to improve the socio-economic status, especially in ASEAN countries which have a relatively similar cultural pattern.

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