



Transforming Women's Power in Rural Communities: An Empowerment Study Using Jo Rowlands' Framework

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Abstract

This study examines how rural women in Pendoworejo Village build, negotiate, and transform power through empowerment initiatives facilitated by Gugah Nurani Indonesia (GNI). The study employs a feminist case study methodology, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation involving mothers, their family members, and GNI facilitators. The findings reveal significant personal transformation, with women developing greater self-confidence, self-esteem, and a stronger sense of capability. The study highlights the importance of viewing empowerment as an ongoing, relational process embedded in context, which cannot be externally imposed but must be facilitated through participatory approaches rooted in culture. These findings contribute to empowerment studies by demonstrating how Rowlands' framework can be applied in the rural Indonesian context to understand the layered transformations that shape women's agency, relationships, and collective action.

Kata Kunci

Pemberdayaan
perempuan;
Kerangka Kerja Jo
Rowlands;
Gugah Nurani
Indonesia

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana perempuan pedesaan di Desa Pendoworejo membangun, menegosiasikan, dan mentransformasi kekuasaan melalui inisiatif pemberdayaan yang difasilitasi oleh Gugah Nurani Indonesia (GNI). Metode studi menggunakan metodologi studi kasus feminis, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan ibu-ibu, anggota keluarga mereka, dan fasilitator GNI. Temuan menunjukkan transformasi pribadi yang signifikan, di mana perempuan mengembangkan kepercayaan diri yang lebih besar, harga diri, dan rasa kemampuan yang lebih kuat. Studi ini menyoroti pentingnya memandang pemberdayaan sebagai proses yang berkelanjutan, relasional, dan tertanam dalam konteks, yang tidak dapat diberikan secara eksternal tetapi harus difasilitasi melalui pendekatan partisipatif dan berakar pada budaya. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada kajian pemberdayaan dengan menunjukkan bagaimana kerangka kerja Rowlands dapat diterapkan dalam konteks pedesaan Indonesia untuk memahami transformasi berlapis yang membentuk agen, hubungan, dan aksi kolektif perempuan.

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INTRODUCTION

Women in rural areas are often positioned in marginalized circumstances due to the persistence of patriarchal norms, unequal gender relations, and limited access to socio-economic resources (Simon & Hasan, 2025). In many agrarian communities in Indonesia, women bear a double burden as they manage domestic responsibilities and childcare, while simultaneously contributing to household income through informal labor and small-scale enterprises (Afifah et al., 2025). This condition is also evident in Pendoworejo Village, a rural area characterized by hierarchical social structures and gendered divisions of labor that tend to disadvantage women. Although women play a significant role in productive and reproductive labor, their social position is often not equally recognized in public spheres or in local decision-making processes (Epstein, 2007).

Feminist scholarship demonstrates that, despite living within restrictive structures, rural women possess the capacity to enact agency and develop survival strategies in contexts of gender injustice (Norris, 2012). Studies on rural women's collectives in Indonesia further show that women can cultivate strength through economic activities, community organizations, and locally rooted networks of solidarity (Ameridyani et al., 2025). These findings suggest that power relations among rural women are not static, but can shift through their engagement in collective spaces that enhance their abilities to act and negotiate (Scott et al., 2017).

In the context of Pendoworejo Village, Gugah Nurani Indonesia (GNI), also known as Good Neighbors Indonesia, serves as a facilitating organization that expands women's access to personal, relational, and collective capacity-building through programs related to health, childcare, and community-based economic empowerment. Through women's economic groups, their roles as community health cadres, and their participation in local initiatives, women acquire new opportunities to develop self-confidence, skills, and social networks that broaden their capacity for decision-making (Zavaleta Cheek & Corbett, 2024). In several cases, women's participation in community groups also enhances their visibility and influence in front of village authorities and external institutions, indicating meaningful progress in collective empowerment (Das, 2024).

Although numerous studies address rural women and gender inequality, research examining how rural women construct and transform power through a specific empowerment framework, particularly Jo Rowlands' model, remains relatively limited in the Indonesian context. Existing studies tend to focus on women's vulnerabilities or their roles in economic activities. However, fewer researchers explore the simultaneous internal, interpersonal, and collective processes that shape the lived realities of rural women (Gressel et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need to understand better the dynamics of power among rural women, particularly regarding how empowerment experiences lead to transformations at the personal, relational, and community levels (Nguyen et al., 2024).

This study aims to analyze how women in Pendoworejo Village build, exercise, and transform power in their everyday lives through empowerment processes carried out in collaboration with Gugah Nurani Indonesia. Using Jo Rowlands' conceptual framework, which encompasses *power within*, *power to*, and *power with*, the research offers an analytical understanding of how women enhance their confidence, make independent decisions, and participate in collective community action. A standpoint feminist perspective is employed to position women's experiences as legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge within the rural social context (Naples & Sachs, 2000).

Understanding power transformation is significant because it reveals not only changes at the individual level, such as self-confidence and agency, but also shifts in relational and structural dynamics that shape women's opportunities and constraints (Hundera & Mudde, 2024). Such insights allow researchers and practitioners to identify whether empowerment initiatives genuinely alter gendered power relations or merely address surface-level issues (Osinski, 2021).

The policy implications are equally significant (del Río & Cerdá, 2014). Analyzing how rural women negotiate and transform power provides evidence on what kinds of interventions effectively enhance women's decision-making capacity (Lecoutere & Chu, 2024), strengthen collective action

(Mudege et al., 2015), and support long-term social change (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). This evidence is essential for designing gender-responsive programs that are contextually grounded, participatory, and aligned with local socio-cultural realities (Elias et al., 2017).

The urgency for rural women's empowerment lies in the fact that women in rural areas often experience intersecting forms of marginalization, economic, social, and institutional (Semkunde et al., 2022). By understanding the processes through which women build and transform power, this research highlights pathways for strengthening their roles as key actors in rural development, ensuring that empowerment efforts are not only impactful but also sustainable and rooted in the lived experiences of women themselves.

Rowlands (1997) conceptualizes empowerment as a dynamic and context-specific process grounded in the broader theoretical debates on power. Drawing on thinkers such as Bachrach and Baratz, Lukes, Foucault, Giddens, Hartsock, and Boulding, Rowlands (1997) argues that the meaning of empowerment cannot be separated from how power is defined. Feminist theorists further refine this discussion by showing that when power is understood primarily as power over, gender relations inevitably reflect male dominance over women. Rowlands challenges the assumption that empowering women means reversing this hierarchy; instead, she emphasizes generative forms of power, power to, power with, and power within—which promote capability, collective action, and self-recognition without domination (Aryani & Lindawati, 2025). She situates empowerment within three interrelated dimensions: personal, relational, and collective, which serve as the analytical framework for this study.

Rowlands (1997) also highlights that empowerment emerges from changes at psychological, social, and structural levels. True empowerment, she argues, cannot be “given” by external actors, as it must grow from within individuals and groups. Consequently, external facilitators must avoid exerting power over that could hinder local agency. Her analytical instrument, comprising contextual/material, structural, and psycho-social aspects, helps assess the extent and depth of empowerment outcomes. Among these, the psycho-social dimension is considered central, as it concerns the transformation of self-perception and the dismantling of internalized oppression, which form the basis for sustained personal and collective change (Andriana, 2024).

To examine the experiences of rural women in this research, feminist standpoint theory serves as the epistemological foundation. As articulated by Harding (1997), standpoint theory asserts that women's lived experiences, particularly those shaped by marginalization, provide a privileged and necessary starting point for producing situated knowledge. In rural communities characterized by patriarchal social structures, standpoint theory enables a deeper analysis of how women negotiate roles, confront gendered constraints, and develop forms of personal, relational, and collective power (Rolin, 2009). This approach allows the study to capture women's empowerment processes more holistically by foregrounding their perspectives and everyday practices (De Smet & Boros, 2021).

Methodologically, the researcher's position as both insider and outsider, having long-term experience in community facilitation while not being part of the village's social structure, creates an advantageous standpoint for exploring women's experiences with sensitivity and depth. This positionality enables the identification of subtle processes of power transformation that may not be visible through surface-level observation (Le Bourdon, 2022).

This research is expected to contribute to the literature on rural women's empowerment by providing theoretical insights into the application of Jo Rowlands' empowerment framework in the Indonesian rural context. Moreover, the study is relevant for informing the development of gender-responsive intervention strategies that are more contextualized, participatory, and sustainable in supporting women as key actors in rural development.

METHOD

This study employs a feminist case study methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of how women in Pendoworejo Village build, exercise, and transform power in their everyday lives through

empowerment initiatives facilitated by Gugah Nurani Indonesia. The case study approach enables researchers to investigate a phenomenon within clearly defined contextual boundaries, exploring it comprehensively and in detail (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995).

A feminist case study, in particular, positions women's lived experiences as legitimate and essential sources of knowledge. This aligns with standpoint feminism, which emphasizes that social realities must be understood from the perspectives and situated experiences of women themselves. Thus, this methodological approach centers women's voices as active agents rather than passive subjects of inquiry.

The researcher's position as a community empowerment facilitator at GNI provides strong access and established relationships with women residents of Pendoworejo Village. Therefore, this study adopts a purposeful sampling strategy, selecting participants who are most capable of providing rich, relevant, and contextual insights into the processes through which power is constructed and transformed. Primary participants include: 1) women who are GNI community partners and have school-aged children; 2) women with roles or agency in education, health, the economy (formal or informal), and community spaces; 3) women actively involved in village empowerment activities.

To strengthen the depth and reliability of the data, the study also involves: 1) husbands or other family members to explore relational dynamics of power; 2) GNI empowerment facilitators who directly support the women in empowerment programs.

This strategy ensures the representation of multiple perspectives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how women cultivate *power within*, *power to*, and *power with* in their socio-cultural context.

Primary data are collected through 1) in-depth interviews. Within feminist research traditions, semi-structured interviews allow empathetic, reflective, and collaborative interactions between the researcher and participants, enabling women to articulate their experiences and the dynamics of power from their own viewpoints. To foster comfort and openness, the researcher uses everyday language familiar to the women. Attention is also paid to non-verbal expressions, which are considered integral to interpreting emotions and meanings embedded in their narratives; 2) Observation. Given the researcher's long-term engagement in the village, participant observation is used to capture firsthand how women interact within households, community settings, and empowerment groups. During the research process, however, the researcher practices *role adjustment* to maintain analytical distance and minimize potential bias arising from pre-existing relationships; 3) Documentation. Documentation is used to complement interview and observational data. This includes field notes, contextual photographs of women's activities and physical environments, and audio recordings of interviews. These documents enrich contextual understanding and support the validation of findings.

Data analysis follows a feminist qualitative approach and involves several stages: 1) Data Management; 2) Transcription and Initial Exploration; 3) Theme Development; 4) Interpretation; 5) Triangulation. This analytical process adheres to feminist research ethics by treating women's experiences as valid knowledge and by ensuring critical and reflective engagement with the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

1. Motherhood Practices

All participants in this study are mothers with children ranging from early childhood to adolescence. Although they primarily identify as homemakers, they remain engaged in various economic activities such as farming, teaching in early childhood education centers (ECE), and managing women's livelihood groups. Domestic responsibilities, particularly childcare and supporting children's learning, continue to constitute their primary duties. As expressed by Participant 2, "*I am the one who teaches the children first, as a mother at home.*"

This statement reflects the moral expectations surrounding motherhood within a patriarchal social context, where women shoulder a substantial portion of domestic labor. Beyond assisting their children's education, several mothers, such as Participants 4 and 6, also enact maternal practices through their roles as ECE educators.

At a broader level, maternal practices are also manifested through social engagement. Participants 4 and 6 actively participate in community-based activities, including volunteering with Gugah Nurani Indonesia (GNI). This aligns with Baraitser's (2012) argument that maternal practice fosters hope in both private and public spheres. Although Participant 4 faced challenges from her husband regarding unpaid social work, she continued to negotiate her involvement in it. Such experiences illustrate how mothers understand social engagement as a form of self-actualization and altruistic expression toward the community (Avieli et al., 2022).

2. Maternal Support in Children's Learning

In addition to domestic work and economic activities, mothers also bear the responsibility of supporting their children's learning processes at home. For Participant 2, who has younger children, this includes preparing them for formal education and guiding daily learning activities. Participant 4 experiences limited access to learning materials and telecommunications signals in her mountainous area, requiring her to search for specific spots to obtain a signal at particular times.

Mothers with older children act more as supervisors, ensuring consistency and discipline in their learning routines. Participant 6, who also works as a PAUD teacher, often struggles to balance her professional duties with supporting her child's learning. Meanwhile, Participant 1 observes that learning from home adds additional pressure on her child due to limited communication with teachers.

These experiences reflect Sara Ruddick's concept of *maternal work*, where mothers respond intuitively to their children's needs and regard them as whole beings, both body and mind, as part of maternal instinct (Keller, 2010). The emotional burden and fatigue experienced by all participants indicate the intensification of caregiving responsibilities when domestic work, economic activities, and children's educational needs converge.

3. Household Dynamics

Despite facing multiple challenges, all families in this study maintain economic resilience through a combination of farming, small-scale enterprises, and other forms of local labor. Participant 3 supplements her income by working in a micro-enterprise and later in a cooperative, while continuing to manage agriculture and livestock. Participant 4 utilizes produce from her garden to meet household food needs. Participant 5 and her husband strengthen their household economy through rattan weaving, whereas Participant 1 relies on agricultural harvests despite unstable prices. These findings highlight the economic resilience of rural households, which is supported by agriculture-based livelihoods and communal work.

Participant 6 experiences a relatively equitable division of domestic labor, which reduces her workload. A similar pattern appears in Participant 1's household, where both spouses share domestic and social roles. In Participant 5's family, the husband also contributes to household chores and livelihood activities. However, his involvement is sometimes constrained by the expectations of his in-laws, who adhere to traditional norms and values. In contrast, Participant 4 previously managed all domestic responsibilities alone, especially childcare and school-related matters. Recently, her husband has begun contributing, which has eased her physical and emotional burden.

Participant 3 faces the heaviest domestic workload. Her husband views cooking, washing, and cleaning strictly as women's duties, leaving all household tasks to her despite her employment. She interprets this as a moral and religious obligation, which reinforces traditional gender stereotypes (Zaidi et al., 2009).

Unequal role distribution increases tension within certain families. Participant 3 reports conflicts triggered by economic pressure and fatigue, which negatively affect the emotional atmosphere of the

household. This highlights how rigid gender norms exacerbate women's vulnerability. Conversely, Participant 6 describes strengthened family cohesion through increased interaction and more balanced division of labor, reflecting enhanced protective family functions (Roman et al., 2025).

Mothers living with extended families experience additional psychological pressure. Participant 5 frequently faces tension due to the expectations of in-laws who continue to uphold patriarchal norms about women's roles (Karim et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Participant 2, who also lives with extended family, experiences a more equitable distribution of responsibilities between herself and her husband, although childcare remains primarily her burden.

4. Social Engagement & Community Involvement

Despite their increasing responsibilities, the mothers continue to be active in social and community empowerment activities. Participant 3 manages the Mbokdaya women's livelihood group, while Participant 6 continues to participate enthusiastically in community programs with GNI. Participants 1 and 4 serve as partners in community-based health initiatives, providing educational support to caregivers to ensure adequate nutritional understanding for children and pregnant women. Each mother's family supports these community-strengthening efforts.

Analysis of Women's Empowerment through Jo Rowlands' Framework: A Critical Discussion.
Empowerment through Jo Rowlands' Framework: A Critical Discussion

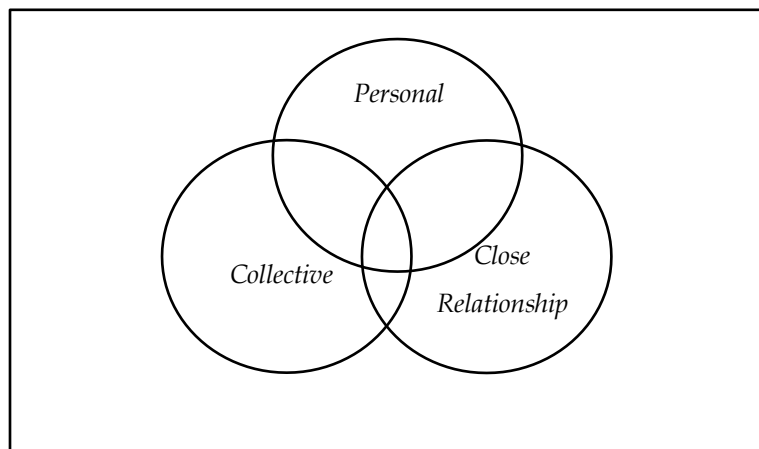


Figure 1. Three Dimensions of Empowerment (Jo Rowlands, 1997)

The analytical process undertaken in this study was conducted in stages and guided by Jo Rowlands' conceptualization of empowerment, which operates across three interrelated dimensions: personal, relational, and collective. Rowlands argues that analyzing empowerment solely through these dimensions is insufficient; rather, it is necessary to distinguish between the *processes* and the *transformative changes* that emerge as empowerment unfolds. Building on this approach, the analysis in this research differentiates between two core components of the empowerment trajectory: first, how women, both as individuals and as members of groups, experience transformation, which constitutes the essential marker of empowerment; and second, the enabling and constraining conditions that shape and influence the progression of this transformative process. This distinction allows for a more nuanced understanding of how empowerment is produced, negotiated, and sustained within the everyday lives of mothers in Pendoworejo Village.

Discussion

1. Personal Empowerment: Core Values and Transformative Shifts

The personal transformations experienced by women in Pendoworejo illustrate how increased self-confidence and self-awareness power within form the foundational layer of empowerment. Women's

growing courage to speak in public forums, take on new roles, and manage micro-enterprises affirms Rowlands' (1997) argument that personal empowerment is rooted in a process of reconstructing one's sense of value and capability.

These findings align with Kabeer (1999), who highlights that shifts in identity, such as moving from "*a domestic woman*" to "*an active social subject*," often emerge once women gain access to safe and supportive learning spaces. In Pendoworejo, such spaces were provided through GNI's community activities, which enabled women to experiment with public roles and responsibilities.

The findings also resonate with Cornwall's (2018) work on *safe spaces*, which demonstrates that women's groups often function as subtle yet powerful arenas for internal transformation. In the village context, micro-enterprise groups and infant and young child feeding meetings played a similar role, creating internal shifts that became the starting point for broader relational and collective empowerment.

2. Drivers of Personal Empowerment

The key drivers behind the development of power within include increased inter-hamlet social interaction, organizational involvement, and access to learning opportunities. These conditions align with the literature on participatory empowerment, which emphasizes that structured, repetitive engagement enables women to develop social competence and leadership skills (Eger et al., 2018).

Consistent and empathetic facilitation further strengthened women's confidence in their own abilities. This finding aligns with Shields (1995), who argues that empowerment is often reinforced by external validation that affirms women's contributions as meaningful. In Pendoworejo, women felt "*capable*" when their roles were visibly acknowledged rather than treated as supplementary.

2. Barriers to Personal Empowerment

Despite these positive developments, personal empowerment remains constrained by structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, unequal domestic labor, and forms of internalized oppression. These findings echo Kabeer's (1999) assertion that rigid gender norms constitute one of the most persistent obstacles to empowerment. Some women's belief that domestic work is "*women's destiny*" shows how patriarchal ideology becomes internalized, which Paulo Freire said in Borelli (1972) conceptualizes as *internalized oppression*. Geographic constraints, such as steep and scattered settlement patterns, also limited women's mobility, mirroring challenges identified in studies of rural women in Southeast Asia who face similar mobility-related disadvantages.

3. Close Relationship Empowerment: Core Values and Transformative Shifts

Women's increasing ability to communicate, request support, and negotiate with their husbands signifies notable changes in power (Rowlands, 1997). These negotiation skills strengthened as women demonstrated their contributions to household income and community initiatives, prompting husbands to perceive their wives' public roles as legitimate and worthy of support (Agarwal, 1997).

This corresponds with Sen's (1989) theory of *cooperative conflicts*, which posits that shifts in intra-household bargaining power occur when women acquire new forms of value or fallback positions. In Pendoworejo, involvement in micro-enterprise groups or health volunteer roles provided women with social legitimacy that improved their bargaining position at home.

4. Drivers and Barriers in Close Relationship Empowerment

Husband support emerged as a powerful facilitator. When husbands recognized the value of women's economic or social contributions, the space for negotiation expanded. This finding is consistent with Daniele (2021), who emphasizes that male support often determines women's sustained participation in public life.

Nonetheless, barriers remained due to prevailing local norms that position men as primary decision-makers. Some women felt uncomfortable making decisions independently or believed they

must seek permission even for simple matters. This reflects Woodfield et al.'s (2005) argument that gender norms function as “unseen scripts” shaping everyday interactions.

5. Collective Empowerment: Core Values and Transformative Shifts

Collective transformations within micro-enterprise groups and volunteer teams illustrate the emergence of power, generated through solidarity and collective action (Rowlands, 1997). The success of the Mbokdaya women's group in product development, networking with village authorities, and gaining public recognition shows how collective spaces can expand women's social influence.

These findings align with Sweetman's (2013) argument that collective empowerment is central to grassroots women's movements. In Pendoworejo, emerging collective identities strengthened not only economic capacities but also women's ability to advocate for community concerns, as seen when PMBA volunteers confidently proposed incentive adjustments in village forums.

6. Drivers and Barriers to Collective Empowerment

Institutional support from GNI, village authorities, and external trainers served as crucial enablers, providing legitimacy and visibility for women's groups. Influential women figures – such as Participant 3 also facilitated cohesion and motivation within the groups. However, collective empowerment faced challenges due to uneven levels of personal empowerment among members. Some women retained traditional beliefs about gender roles or lacked the confidence to participate actively in their lives. This supports Wood & Thomas' (2017) analysis, which suggests that women's groups often experience internal tensions when members hold divergent gender ideologies.

These dynamics reinforce Rowlands' argument that collective empowerment requires a strong foundation in personal and relational empowerment. Without adequate transformation at these earlier levels, collective empowerment struggles to grow sustainably and coherently.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that women in Pendoworejo experienced a multidimensional transformation in how they construct and negotiate power, as interpreted through Jo Rowlands' threefold framework of *power within*, *power to*, and *power with*. First, at the personal level, women showed significant growth in self-confidence, self-worth, and perceived capability, confirming Rowlands' argument that internal transformation forms the foundation of empowerment. These changes emerged through their participation in safe, structured learning spaces facilitated by GNI. Second, empowerment within close relationships became evident as women developed a more substantial capacity to negotiate decisions, articulate needs, and gain recognition from partners and family members. Their increased household bargaining power shows how new forms of social contribution, such as involvement in small enterprises or community health work, improved their fallback positions and legitimacy within domestic relations.

Third, the collective dimension of empowerment was reflected in the ability of women's groups to build solidarity, secure institutional recognition, and engage with village governance structures. This study confirms that collective empowerment strengthens women's public presence and advocacy capacity, although its sustainability depends on the depth of personal and relational empowerment achieved by group members. Notably, the study also highlights that empowerment is neither linear nor uniform in nature. Structural constraints, including patriarchal norms, unequal domestic labor, and internalized oppression, continue to shape the limits and possibilities of transformation. The concept of *power has been proven* valuable for understanding how women's empowerment is mediated by relationships with spouses, children, and community norms, revealing moments where empowerment and disempowerment coexist.

Overall, this research underscores that women's empowerment in rural contexts is a deeply relational and context-specific process. It evolves through the interplay of individual transformation,

household negotiation, and collective action, all of which are influenced by social norms and institutional support. Future studies should examine how these transformations unfold after external facilitation ends, and development actors must recognize empowerment as a long-term, non-linear process that cannot be fully controlled but must be supported through participatory, contextually grounded approaches.

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