

Negotiating Empowerment within Indigenous Structures: Socio-Cultural Pathways of Dani Women's Economic Agency in Jayawijaya, Papua

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Abstract

This study examines how empowerment among Dani indigenous women in Jayawijaya, Papua emerges through socio-cultural negotiation rather than purely economic intervention. While indigenous women play central roles in subsistence agriculture, cultural preservation, and household economies, structural barriers related to gender norms, education access, and institutional recognition continue to limit their agency. Using a qualitative interpretive design, the research integrates indigenous entrepreneurship theory, gender and development perspectives, and social capital frameworks to analyze empowerment pathways grounded in local cultural systems. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving indigenous women, community leaders, and local governance actors. Findings indicate that empowerment is shaped by five interconnected domains: education access, local-resource-based entrepreneurship, health resilience, leadership participation, and cultural preservation. Rather than replacing traditional roles, effective empowerment strategies emerge when economic initiatives align with indigenous values and collective identities. Conceptually, the study reframes indigenous women's empowerment as a structurally embedded relational process rather than a linear development outcome. By positioning empowerment within cultural governance and community networks, the research contributes to debates on contextualized gender development and indigenous entrepreneurship in peripheral regions.

Keywords: *Indigenous women empowerment, Dani women, Socio-cultural entrepreneurship, Papua, Gendered development governance*

1. Introduction

Despite decades of development programs aimed at strengthening women's economic participation, empowerment remains a deeply contested concept within indigenous contexts. Mainstream development discourse often frames empowerment as individual autonomy, market integration, or institutional inclusion; however, feminist and postcolonial scholars argue that empowerment is fundamentally relational and embedded within cultural systems that shape agency and decision-making (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 1999; UN Women, 2024). This tension becomes particularly salient when empowerment frameworks developed in Western policy environments are applied to indigenous societies whose economic practices are intertwined with kinship structures, cultural legitimacy, and collective survival strategies.

In the field of indigenous entrepreneurship, scholars increasingly highlight that economic activities cannot be separated from cultural governance and community identity. Indigenous entrepreneurship is often driven by social obligations, environmental stewardship, and collective resilience rather than purely profit-maximizing motivations (Dana, 2015; Peredo & Anderson, 2006; Peredo & McLean, 2013). At the same time, gender and entrepreneurship research has emphasized structural barriers faced by women, including unequal access to resources, institutional constraints, and gendered expectations that shape participation in economic systems (Brush, De Bruin, & Welter, 2009; Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016; McAdam, Harrison, & Leitch, 2019). Yet these two streams of literature rarely intersect in ways that explain how indigenous cultural systems mediate women's economic agency, leaving a conceptual gap in understanding empowerment beyond individualistic frameworks.

Recent calls for contextualized entrepreneurship research further stress the importance of place, institutional environments, and socio-cultural embeddedness in shaping entrepreneurial processes (Ratten, 2023; Welter, Baker, Audretsch, & Gartner, 2017). Studies conducted in developing regions demonstrate that women's empowerment cannot be reduced to income generation alone but must be analyzed through broader socio-cultural negotiations and community-based economic structures (Bullough, Guelich, Manolova, & Schjoedt, 2022; Tillmar, Ahl, Berglund, & Pettersson, 2022). However, empirical research that explicitly connects indigenous cultural governance with women's empowerment remains limited, particularly in eastern Indonesian contexts where local knowledge systems and development dynamics intersect in complex ways.

The socio-cultural landscape of Papua provides a critical setting for examining these theoretical tensions. Among the Dani indigenous communities, women play central roles in agricultural production, traditional markets, and household economic resilience. Their economic participation reflects not only livelihood strategies but also cultural legitimacy and social recognition within community structures. Studies on local wisdom and indigenous economies in Indonesia suggest that economic practices are often embedded within communal values and traditional governance systems, shaping how empowerment is negotiated and experienced (Az-Zahra & Guntur, 2025; Halaç & Çelik, 2019). Nevertheless, development narratives frequently portray indigenous women primarily through vulnerability discourses, overlooking the agency embedded in everyday economic practices.

Addressing these theoretical gaps, this study examines women's empowerment among Dani indigenous communities through a socio-cultural governance perspective. Rather than conceptualizing empowerment as a linear outcome of economic inclusion, the research positions it as a negotiated process shaped by cultural norms, institutional dynamics, and regional development trajectories. By integrating insights from indigenous entrepreneurship, gender studies, and contextualized entrepreneurship research, this study aims to advance a more culturally grounded understanding of empowerment in indigenous settings.

Theoretically, this research contributes in three interrelated ways. First, it reconceptualizes empowerment as relational agency embedded within indigenous cultural governance, extending existing feminist entrepreneurship debates beyond individualistic interpretations. Second, it bridges indigenous entrepreneurship and gendered economic

participation literature by demonstrating how cultural legitimacy structures women's access to economic roles. Third, it advances contextual entrepreneurship scholarship by illustrating how place-based socio-cultural dynamics reshape empowerment trajectories in geographically and institutionally complex regions. Through this integrated perspective, the study offers a theoretically informed framework for understanding women's empowerment as a dynamic interaction between cultural systems, institutional environments, and economic practices.

2. Method

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative design grounded in an indigenous feminist methodological perspective to examine how Dani women's entrepreneurship practices contribute to household economic empowerment in Wamena, Papua Highlands. Rather than treating women's economic participation as a purely individual entrepreneurial outcome, the research conceptualized empowerment as a relational and culturally embedded process shaped by indigenous knowledge systems, gendered social roles, and local institutional structures. An indigenous feminist lens was employed to recognize women's agency within traditional socio-cultural contexts while avoiding external normative assumptions about entrepreneurship and empowerment (Smith, 2012; Henry et al., 2021; McAdam et al., 2022). This approach enabled the study to explore how economic practices are negotiated through kinship networks, collective labor traditions, and culturally specific understandings of value.

Fieldwork was conducted in Wamena, Jayawijaya Regency, Papua Highlands Province, an area characterized by strong indigenous cultural systems and emerging local economic transformation. The site was selected purposively because it represents a central economic hub for Dani communities where women play visible yet often underrecognized roles in agriculture, small-scale trading, handicraft production, and informal markets. Within this context, entrepreneurship is not merely a market activity but an extension of social responsibility and communal survival strategies, making it an appropriate setting for indigenous feminist inquiry (Dana, 2021; Suryawan & Aji, 2022).

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives on women's economic participation. A total of twenty informants were involved, including twelve Dani women engaged in household-based economic activities, three indigenous female leaders or customary figures, three local government representatives from women's empowerment and small business agencies, and two facilitators from local NGOs supporting community development programs. Sampling decisions were guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until recurring themes emerged and no substantially new insights were identified (Guest et al., 2017). This multi-layered sampling strategy enabled triangulation across experiential, institutional, and cultural viewpoints, ensuring that women's voices remained central while also situating them within broader governance and development frameworks.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews explored narratives of economic participation, cultural expectations, gendered responsibilities, and strategies for navigating structural constraints. Observations were conducted in local markets,

agricultural spaces, and home-based business settings to understand everyday entrepreneurial practices as embodied social activities rather than abstract economic behaviors. Documentary sources included regional development reports, empowerment program records, and statistical publications to contextualize local experiences within broader policy environments. These combined methods allowed the research to capture the intersection between lived experience and institutional structures, a key principle in indigenous feminist methodology (Smith, 2012; Welter et al., 2019).

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach combining inductive and deductive coding processes. Initial coding focused on recurring patterns related to agency, collective labor, cultural values, and economic resilience, while subsequent analytical stages linked these themes to theoretical discussions on gendered entrepreneurship and indigenous economic systems (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kimbu et al., 2023). Rather than fragmenting women's experiences into isolated categories, the analysis emphasized relational dynamics between household decision-making, cultural obligations, and structural opportunities. This interpretive stance aligns with feminist qualitative traditions that prioritize context, power relations, and voice in the construction of knowledge (McAdam et al., 2022).

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and culturally appropriate communication practices were maintained throughout fieldwork. Participants' identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality, particularly given the sensitivity of discussing gender roles and socio-economic challenges within indigenous communities. Reflexivity was practiced continuously to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and minimize interpretive bias, recognizing that knowledge production in indigenous contexts requires respect for local epistemologies and collaborative engagement (Smith, 2012).

By integrating indigenous methodological principles with feminist entrepreneurship perspectives, this research positions methodology not merely as a technical procedure but as a theoretical stance. The study conceptualizes Dani women's entrepreneurship as a socially embedded practice shaped by cultural meaning-making, structural inequality, and local governance dynamics. This positioning allows the findings to move beyond descriptive accounts of economic activity toward a deeper understanding of how indigenous women negotiate empowerment within layered socio-cultural and institutional environments.

3. Results

The findings demonstrate that empowerment among Dani women in Wamena emerges not as a linear outcome of economic participation but as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction between educational access, locally embedded entrepreneurship, health conditions, social leadership, and culturally grounded practices. Rather than operating independently, these dimensions form a layered structure of opportunity and constraint that defines how women negotiate agency within indigenous socio-cultural systems.

Educational attainment appears as the most foundational structural boundary influencing economic participation. As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of participants possessed only elementary-level education or below, which limited their ability to engage

in administrative tasks, financial planning, and broader market interactions. Women with higher educational backgrounds demonstrated stronger confidence in managing business records, accessing training opportunities, and participating in economic decision-making processes within their households. These patterns indicate that education functions not merely as human capital but also as a symbolic resource that reshapes gendered power relations. Higher literacy levels contributed to increased bargaining power, allowing women to move from passive economic actors toward more strategic roles in family livelihood planning.

Table 1. Distribution of Educational Access among Dani Women (n=20)

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage	Implication for Economic Literacy
Did not complete elementary school	6	30%	Limited business comprehension
Elementary school	7	35%	Basic economic participation
Junior high school	4	20%	Administrative capability emerging
Senior high school+	3	15%	Strategic economic planning capacity

Economic activities among Dani women were deeply rooted in locally available resources, reflecting a culturally embedded form of entrepreneurship rather than a market-driven individualistic model. Subsistence agriculture dominated women’s economic engagement, followed by small-scale trading, handicraft production, and local food processing (see Table 2). These practices illustrate how economic participation is intertwined with cultural identity and collective survival strategies. Women frequently described their entrepreneurial activities as extensions of household responsibility rather than independent business ventures, highlighting the blurred boundary between productive and reproductive labor within indigenous contexts.

Table 2. Types of Economic Activities among Dani Women (n=20)

Type of Activity	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation
Subsistence farming	8	40%	Cultural-economic continuity
Small trading	5	25%	Market interface
Handicrafts	4	20%	Cultural entrepreneurship
Local food production	3	15%	Household-based microenterprise

Health and wellbeing emerged as an often invisible yet powerful dimension shaping empowerment trajectories. As shown in Table 3, half of the participants experienced moderate health conditions, which reduced productivity and limited participation in entrepreneurial activities. Health challenges were closely linked to the burden of dual roles, where women simultaneously managed domestic responsibilities and income-generating work. These findings suggest that empowerment cannot be understood solely through economic indicators; rather, physical wellbeing functions as a structural prerequisite for sustained participation in local economies.

Table 3. Health and Wellbeing Status of Dani Women (n=20)

Health Status	Frequency	Percentage	Economic Impact
Good	5	25%	High productivity
Moderate	10	50%	Reduced economic capacity
Poor	5	25%	Limited participation

Social leadership and community participation further shaped women’s empowerment pathways. While a minority of participants held active leadership roles, those who did demonstrated higher autonomy and stronger influence in local decision-making processes. Leadership participation provided access to networks, information flows, and collective resources, transforming individual agency into community-level influence. However, the data (see Table 4) also reveal persistent structural barriers rooted in patriarchal norms that restrict women’s visibility in formal governance spaces.

Table 4. Social Participation and Leadership among Dani Women (n=20)

Participation Level	Frequency	Percentage	Empowerment Implication
Not involved	4	20%	Limited social influence
Limited involvement	10	50%	Peripheral participation
Active leadership	6	30%	Strategic influence

Cultural preservation activities emerged as a hybrid arena where identity maintenance and economic empowerment intersected. Women actively involved in cultural production—such as noken weaving, traditional food processing, and participation in ritual practices—demonstrated increased social recognition and economic resilience. Rather than resisting modernization, cultural practices functioned as adaptive strategies enabling women to integrate tradition with income generation. Participation levels varied, with most women engaged at either limited or active levels (see Table 5), indicating significant potential for culturally grounded empowerment initiatives.

Table 5. Participation in Cultural Preservation among Dani Women (n=20)

Participation in Cultural Preservation	Frequency	Percentage
Not involved	5	25%
Limited involvement	8	40%
Active involvement	7	35%

Across all domains, empowerment appeared as a negotiated process shaped by overlapping structural constraints and cultural resources. The integrated empowerment matrix presented in the overall findings table illustrates how education, economic participation, health, leadership, and cultural engagement collectively influence women’s agency. Rather than representing isolated variables, these dimensions form an interconnected system in which improvements in one domain—such as education or health—amplify opportunities in others. Consequently, empowerment among Dani women should be understood as an evolving relational process embedded within indigenous cultural frameworks and broader socio-economic transformations occurring in Papua Pegunungan.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reposition empowerment among Dani indigenous women beyond conventional economic participation narratives by demonstrating how agency is continuously negotiated within intersecting cultural, structural, and institutional contexts. Rather than reflecting a linear progression toward autonomy, empowerment emerges as a relational process shaped by indigenous social structures, gender norms, and uneven

access to development resources. This interpretation challenges dominant modernization perspectives that often frame women's economic involvement as inherently emancipatory, instead highlighting how empowerment unfolds through culturally embedded practices and negotiated forms of agency (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 1999).

From an indigenous feminist perspective, the results reveal that economic activities among Dani women are not simply individual entrepreneurial choices but extensions of collective cultural responsibilities. Subsistence farming, handicrafts, and local trading illustrate forms of embedded entrepreneurship where economic roles are intertwined with identity preservation and communal survival. Such patterns resonate with scholarship arguing that indigenous women's economic participation frequently operates within relational economies rather than market-driven individualism (Rauna Kuokkanen, 2011; Smith, 2012). In this context, empowerment cannot be measured solely through income generation but must be understood as the capacity to sustain cultural continuity while navigating evolving socio-economic pressures.

Education emerges as a pivotal structural determinant shaping empowerment trajectories. The findings show that limited educational access restricts women's participation in administrative and strategic economic activities, reinforcing gendered hierarchies within households and communities. This aligns with global development research emphasizing education as a key driver of women's agency, not only by enhancing economic literacy but also by transforming symbolic power relations within social structures (Bhuwania, Mukherji, & Swaminathan, 2024; Unterhalter, 2005). However, the Jayawijaya context illustrates that educational attainment alone does not automatically translate into empowerment; rather, its impact depends on how literacy intersects with cultural expectations and community acceptance.

The role of health and wellbeing further expands existing discussions on empowerment by revealing how physical conditions shape women's capacity to engage in economic activities. While empowerment literature frequently emphasizes financial and educational dimensions, this study highlights health as an underlying structural prerequisite for agency. Women experiencing moderate or poor health conditions faced significant limitations in sustaining entrepreneurial activities, reflecting broader debates in feminist political economy regarding the invisible burden of reproductive labor (Elson, 2017; Razavi, 2017). In indigenous contexts where women carry dual roles as caregivers and income earners, health disparities become both a personal and structural constraint affecting empowerment outcomes.

Social leadership and community participation represent another critical dimension linking individual agency to collective transformation. Women actively involved in leadership roles demonstrated higher levels of autonomy and influence within local decision-making processes, supporting theories that empowerment is relational and socially embedded rather than purely individualistic (Agarwal, 2010; Batliwala, 2007). Leadership engagement provided access to networks and institutional resources, enabling women to negotiate power within traditionally male-dominated structures. Yet, the persistence of patriarchal norms indicates that empowerment remains contingent on broader cultural shifts, suggesting that structural change requires both institutional support and community-level dialogue.

Cultural preservation practices offer a particularly significant contribution to indigenous empowerment theory. The findings illustrate that cultural activities such as woven weaving and traditional food production function not merely as heritage preservation but as adaptive economic strategies. This challenges binary assumptions that modernization and tradition exist in opposition, instead demonstrating how indigenous women integrate cultural identity with entrepreneurial innovation. Such dynamics align with decolonial feminist perspectives emphasizing that empowerment within indigenous communities often involves reclaiming cultural knowledge systems rather than replacing them with external development models (Lugones, 2010; Walter & Andersen, 2013).

Importantly, the interaction among education, health, economic participation, leadership, and cultural engagement suggests that empowerment operates as a systemic process rather than a set of isolated variables. Improvements in one domain appear to amplify opportunities in others, reinforcing the argument that empowerment should be analyzed through an integrated structural lens. This finding extends prior gender and development scholarship by illustrating how localized indigenous contexts reshape global empowerment frameworks. Rather than applying universal indicators, the Jayawijaya case demonstrates the need for culturally grounded analytical models capable of capturing relational agency and structural constraints simultaneously.

From a policy perspective, these insights underscore the limitations of one-dimensional empowerment programs focused solely on microfinance or entrepreneurship training. Effective strategies must address structural barriers such as educational inequality, health access, and institutional inclusion while respecting indigenous cultural frameworks. The study therefore contributes to emerging debates on culturally responsive governance, suggesting that empowerment initiatives in indigenous regions should prioritize participatory approaches that integrate traditional knowledge systems with contemporary development agendas (Escobar, 2018; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2024).

Overall, this discussion reframes empowerment among Dani women as a dynamic intersection between indigenous identity and socio-economic transformation. By positioning empowerment within relational, structural, and cultural dimensions, the study advances theoretical conversations on indigenous feminism and gendered development. The findings highlight that empowerment is neither purely economic nor purely cultural but emerges through ongoing negotiations between agency and structure within geographically and culturally complex environments.

5. Conclusions

This study repositions the empowerment of Dani indigenous women beyond a narrow developmental narrative by demonstrating that empowerment emerges through the intersection of cultural continuity, relational agency, and structural constraints. Rather than portraying indigenous women solely as marginalized actors requiring external intervention, the findings reveal how women actively negotiate economic participation, cultural preservation, and social leadership within evolving local contexts. By situating empowerment within lived realities in Jayawijaya, this research contributes to a more grounded understanding of how indigenous women reshape gender roles without necessarily disengaging from traditional socio-cultural frameworks.

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends empowerment theory by introducing a relational and culturally embedded lens that challenges individualistic assumptions commonly found in mainstream gender development literature. The findings suggest that empowerment among Dani women operates through collective practices, kinship networks, and culturally meaningful economic activities, thereby advancing discussions within indigenous feminist scholarship and Gender and Development theory. By integrating dimensions of education, health, economic participation, leadership, and cultural identity into a unified analytical frame, the research proposes a multidimensional approach that bridges empowerment theory with indigenous epistemologies and decolonial perspectives. This theoretical advancement underscores that empowerment is not a linear transition toward autonomy but a negotiated process shaped by local norms, institutional access, and socio-economic realities.

Practically, the study offers several implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and local institutions. First, empowerment strategies should prioritize culturally responsive education and literacy programs that strengthen economic capacity without disrupting indigenous value systems. Second, economic empowerment initiatives need to move beyond short-term assistance toward long-term community-based structures such as women's cooperatives, culturally rooted entrepreneurship, and localized market networks. Third, health and wellbeing must be integrated into empowerment policies, recognizing that physical and reproductive health significantly influence women's economic participation. Finally, strengthening women's leadership within community forums requires collaborative engagement with traditional authorities to foster inclusive governance without generating cultural resistance. These implications highlight the importance of designing empowerment interventions that align with indigenous social structures rather than imposing externally defined models of gender equality.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations that open avenues for future research. The findings are rooted in a specific indigenous context, and comparative studies across different Papuan communities or other indigenous societies could deepen theoretical generalizability. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how empowerment trajectories evolve over time, particularly in response to policy interventions and socio-economic changes. Furthermore, future studies may integrate mixed-method approaches to explore the relationship between cultural participation, economic outcomes, and women's wellbeing more systematically. Expanding the analytical framework to include environmental sustainability and intergenerational knowledge transmission could also enrich understanding of empowerment within indigenous development pathways.

In closing, this research highlights that empowering indigenous women is not simply a matter of increasing access to resources but involves recognizing the dynamic interplay between culture, agency, and structural conditions. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of Dani women, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to rethink empowerment through locally grounded and culturally sensitive perspectives. Such an approach not only strengthens theoretical debates within gender and development studies but also offers a pathway toward more inclusive and sustainable forms of social transformation in indigenous regions.

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