



# Grassroots Empowerment and Economic Resilience A Case Study of Depo Lestari Among Displaced Banjar Women

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how Depo Lestari, a woman-led, community-based hub in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, has emerged as a grassroots response to economic and cultural displacement caused by palm oil plantation expansion. Indigenous Banjar communities have experienced land dispossession and urban migration, leading to a breakdown in traditional livelihoods and social cohesion. Banjar women, in particular, face layered challenges economic marginalization, gendered labor roles, and exclusion from mainstream development programs. Using a feminist qualitative methodology that includes in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, this research investigates how Depo Lestari functions as more than a retail outlet. It has become a learning space that facilitates informal economic education, emotional solidarity, and self-sufficiency for displaced women. The store embodies local values of halal, dignity, and reciprocity, offering a sustainable model of economic resilience rooted in ethnic identity and mutual aid. The findings illustrate how cultural rootedness, faith-based ethics, and informal knowledge networks can counter structural exclusion without reliance on formal institutions or external aid. The case contributes to broader debates on inclusive economic empowerment, post-extractive economies, and feminist development models. It suggests the importance of recognizing and supporting locally embedded solutions in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

## Keywords

- Feminist community economics
- Grassroots empowerment
- Informal economy
- Indigenous women
- Post-extractive livelihoods

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## 1. Introduction

The global expansion of extractive industries, particularly palm oil, has become a primary driver of profound social and ecological conflict across Southeast Asia [1,2]. Promoted as a pillar of national development [3,4], this expansion has accelerated land acquisition, dispossession of Indigenous peoples [5], and deforestation [6], creating complex challenges for equity and well-being [7]. A Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) lens reveals that these impacts are not neutral [8,9]; they are intensely gendered processes that disproportionately harm women and marginalized communities [10]. Women are often the first to experience the loss of land and livelihood, yet they are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, rendering their struggles invisible in dominant development narratives [11,12].

Nowhere are these dynamics more apparent than in Indonesia, the world's largest palm oil producer [3,13,14]. Between 2000 and 2020, the nation's oil palm plantations more than tripled in area, with Kalimantan emerging as a major hub of production [15,16]. In South Kalimantan alone, plantations cover hundreds of thousands of hectares, yet this growth has been marked by intense agrarian conflict [17,18], making South Kalimantan one of the provinces with the highest number of land disputes in the nation [19]. Reports from the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (2022) and WALHI document hundreds of land disputes. These findings reveal a landscape where corporate interests often supersede community rights. This has led

to the widespread displacement of Indigenous communities like the Banjar, whose traditional livelihoods, deeply tied to the region's forests and rivers have been systematically dismantled [20,21].

This dispossession creates a state of "double exclusion" for the Banjar people. They are first disconnected from their traditional means of survival and then largely shut out from the formal wage economy of the plantations, which often favors migrant labor over local communities [22,23]. Forced to relocate to the urban margins of cities like Banjarmasin, Banjar men typically find precarious work in the informal sector, while women's economic lives become even more invisible [24-27]. Confined to the domestic sphere or home-based micro-enterprises, their labor is vital for household survival but remains unrecognized in economic policy [28,29]. This economic marginalization is compounded by what numerous studies have identified as the erasure of their customary land rights [30,31], increased workloads [32,33], and exposure to environmental hazards, reinforcing patriarchal structures and deepening their economic dependency [34].

While extensive research documents these patterns of dispossession, far less attention has been paid to the grassroots, women-led responses that emerge from within these communities [12,35,36]. This scholarly gap is mirrored in policy. Provincial development programs and sustainability initiatives have largely failed to incorporate



gendered insights or support the informal economies where displaced women operate [37-39]. A 2024 report from the Ministry of Women Empowerment, for instance, found that nearly 70% of national digital economy and sustainability programs failed to include women in informal settings.

This paper addresses this gap by examining Depo Lestari, a woman-led food and beverage ingredient store in Banjarmasin that has organically evolved into a community-based learning hub for displaced Banjar women. It argues that Depo Lestari represents a form of feminist community economics that builds economic and social resilience by creating a "diverse economy" outside of formal state or corporate structures. Analyzed through the theoretical lens of J.K. Gibson-Graham's [40] work on community economies, this study reveals how Banjar women mobilize cultural and religious values, such as reciprocity, dignity, and *halal* (permissible) principles to counter the structural exclusion of a post-extractive economy. By positioning these women not as passive victims but as creative agents, this paper illuminates a culturally grounded model of empowerment that thrives without reliance on external aid or formal institutions.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section elaborates on the theoretical framework of feminist political ecology and community economies. The third section details the feminist qualitative methodology employed in the study. The fourth section presents the findings, analyzing the specific economic and social practices that constitute Depo Lestari as a hub of resilience. Finally, the discussion explores the broader implications of this model for debates on inclusive development, post-extractive livelihoods, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a feminist qualitative case study methodology to understand how displaced Banjar women in Banjarmasin build economic resilience through grassroots community spaces. A qualitative approach was chosen for its suitability in generating an in-depth, descriptive understanding of a complex social phenomenon from the perspective of those who live it [41]. The feminist lens is a critical methodological commitment to social justice, aiming to create knowledge that empowers marginalized groups, challenges hierarchical power relations, and contributes to social change [41,42]. Using Depo Lestari as a single case study, the research explores how gender, faith, and informal knowledge intersect in shaping survival strategies within a post-extractive urban context.

### 2.1. Researcher positionality and reflexivity

In line with feminist research principles, this study acknowledges that knowledge is situated and that the researcher is not a neutral observer [43]. As the primary researcher, my position is that of a partial outsider to the Banjar community, differing in educational background

and formal economic standing. This positionality creates power dynamics that were actively and continuously managed through a practice of reflexivity [44]. Throughout the fieldwork, a detailed reflexive journal was maintained to critically examine my assumptions, interpretations, and the ways in which my interactions might be shaping the data collected. This practice is a methodological tool to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings by making the process of knowledge production transparent [44].

### 2.2. Research site and participant recruitment

The research was conducted in Banjarmasin, the provincial capital of South Kalimantan, Indonesia. The city is a primary destination for Indigenous Banjar communities displaced from rural areas by the expansion of extractive industries. The specific site of the case study is Depo Lestari, a woman-led community hub located in a peri-urban neighborhood with a high concentration of displaced families.

Fieldwork was conducted over an extended period between 2016 and 2020. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants central to the phenomenon. The initial participants were the founder of Depo Lestari and several of its core members. From there, snowball sampling was employed, as initial participants introduced the researcher to other women in their network. This method was effective for building trust within a close-knit community. The final sample consisted of 62 participants, primarily displaced Banjar women engaged with Depo Lestari as customers, suppliers, or informal members, with an age range of 15 to 55 years. This range reflects the local reality where the tradition of early marriage (*kawin anom*) and subsequent school drop-out can lead to young women's entry into the informal economy [45,46].

### 2.3. Data collection

Data were collected over the four-year fieldwork period using a combination of qualitative methods to allow for triangulation and a rich, multi-faceted understanding of the case.

- In-depth, Semi-structured Interviews and Informal Conversations: A total of 613 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were conducted. This high number reflects the iterative and long-term nature of the engagement, with most participants taking part in multiple interviews over the course of the study. The interviews explored life histories, experiences of displacement, economic strategies, the role of faith and culture in their work, and their engagement with Depo Lestari. All interactions were conducted in the local Banjarese language to ensure cultural nuance and sensitivity. Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent, and subsequently transcribed and translated for analysis.
- Participant Observation: Approximately 2,500 hours of participant observation were conducted at Depo

Lestari and in the surrounding community. This involved observing daily operations, customer-owner interactions, informal knowledge sharing, and community gatherings. To build rapport, the researcher took on a role of active participation where appropriate, such as assisting with daily tasks and listening to community stories. Detailed field notes were written immediately following each observation period.

- Document Analysis: Relevant local materials were collected and analyzed to contextualize the findings. These included informal business records, product notes, written recipes shared among the women, and the public-facing social media presence of Depo Lestari and similar local enterprises.

#### 2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, guided by an intersectional lens. The analysis was an iterative process. First, all interview transcripts and field notes were read multiple times to ensure deep familiarity. Next, an open coding process was initiated to identify initial patterns and concepts emerging from the data. These initial codes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories, focusing on how displacement, gender roles, and Islamic values collectively influence the women's everyday economic choices. Rather than isolating variables, the analysis centered on lived experience, emotional labor, and the spiritual intentions underlying the women's work.

This intersectional approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how overlapping systems of power and meaning shape the women's strategies for resilience.

#### 2.5. Ethical considerations

This research adhered to strict ethical protocols for conducting research with Indigenous and marginalized communities, centered on the principles of reciprocity, collaboration, and respect for autonomy [47].

- Informed Consent: Prior to any data collection, the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality were explained to each participant in the Banjarese language. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants, as this was deemed more culturally appropriate than written forms in this context.
- Confidentiality: All participants and specific locations have been given pseudonyms in the final manuscript, and any identifying details have been altered to protect their privacy.
- Reciprocity and Community Benefit: The research was designed to be non-extractive [47]. As a direct act of reciprocity and participatory accountability, a short, community-facing report summarizing the key findings was prepared in the local language and shared with the participants at Depo Lestari for their

feedback and use. The goal is for the published research to serve as a formal record of the women's innovation, which can be used by the community in their own advocacy efforts.

### 3. Result

#### 3.1. Theme 1: the context of gendered exclusion and early marriage

Participants' life histories were consistently marked by structural barriers that intertwined land dispossession with educational exclusion. Mrs. D's experience exemplifies this pattern. Her family was displaced by a palm oil plantation when she was ten years old. She recalled:

"My father promised to let me go to school in Banjarmasin after we arrived but it never happened. By the time I was already 14, my father married me to one of his family's nephews. I guess that's my life destiny it is."

This trajectory, where displacement leads to truncated education and early marriage was common. Of the 22 core members of the Depo Lestari community, none held an undergraduate degree, and the majority had not completed high school. This was often framed by a prevailing community belief that deprioritized formal education for women.

As one participant recalled hearing throughout her childhood, "Why send our daughter to university? She will only become a wife anyway." This norm is closely linked to the Banjar tradition of *kawin anom* (early marriage), which participants described as a liability in the post-extractive urban environment, leaving them with limited skills and heightened economic vulnerability.

#### 3.2. Theme 2: informal mentorship and economic transformation

In a context where participants felt excluded from formal microcredit schemes, Depo Lestari emerged as an organic, highly relational alternative. The mentorship model began with a simple entry point into the local economy: teaching newcomers to bake *bolu*, a traditional Indonesian sponge cake. The owner, known as Taci, would often provide a baking pan to start. The initial business model was based on selling *wadai betatak* (slices of cake) through a local consignment system known as *titip jual di pasar*, where women entrust their cakes to a market vendor who sells them on their behalf.

This model was sustained by a carefully structured system of non-cash financial support. All 62 women in the study received some form of assistance, structured through four mechanisms: (1) direct provision of free ingredients and equipment for the most vulnerable; (2) free skills-development classes for eager learners; (3) significant discounts to accelerate profitability for beginners; and (4) payment delays of up to four weeks to manage cash flow.

While participants were reluctant to discuss specific income figures, the material changes in their lives provided powerful evidence of economic transformation. The case of Mrs. D is representative. In 2016, she arrived at the store via a *becak* (a three-wheeled cycle rickshaw), in a state of desperation. Her husband earned a precarious income as a chicken butcher. By the end of 2019, her family had purchased a motorcycle, her husband had joined her growing home bakery business, and they were able to send two of their children to a respected *pesantren* (an Islamic boarding school), a significant marker of social and economic achievement in their community.

### 3.3. Theme 3: faith-driven values and an inclusive learning environment

The social environment of Depo Lestari was guided by shared ethical values that transcended religious differences and fostered a non-competitive business culture. The community was bound by values of *ikhlas* (sincerity), seeking *barokah* (divine blessing), and generosity. These values manifested in economic practices that prioritized collective well-being, such as establishing quality standards rather than engaging in price wars, and creating a collaborative business network where women would subcontract parts of large orders to one another.

This ethos was institutionalized in the second-floor Baking Centre, which hosted regular subsidized classes (50-60 participants for demonstrations, 15-20 for hands-on sessions). Crucially, the classes fostered an interactive learning environment that countered the cultural norm of *supan*. As Mrs. N explained, "*Kami supan, kak ae*" ("We are shy/embarrassed, sister"), reflecting a cultural reluctance to speak up that is common in Indonesian educational settings, often stemming from a fear of making mistakes or being judged. The owner actively worked to overcome this by encouraging questions and offering small prizes. Mrs. A, a long-time member, reflected on the psychological impact of this environment:

"I don't know how inferior I felt before I was doing this. I realized how much I changed after I saw my niece and nephew could not ask me a question. They are *supan*, they said. That's why I always asked my children to be brave asking and answering something. That makes me grow like this and I want that for my children as well."

### 3.4. Theme 4: relational shifts and women's leadership

The economic empowerment gained through Depo Lestari precipitated significant shifts in household gender dynamics. Of the 56 married participants in the study, all reported a significant positive change in their husbands' attitudes. As the women's financial contributions grew, husbands who had previously been dismissive became active partners, taking on supportive roles such as purchasing ingredients and managing school runs. Crucially, all 56 women noted that they retained full control over the business's finances, expanding their own authority within the household.

This transformation also created new forms of community leadership that challenged traditional patriarchal structures. This is particularly significant within Banjar society, where men have historically been dominant in public life and women's roles have been centered on the domestic sphere [48]. The most prominent example was Mrs. E, who grew her business into a chain of five bakeries employing 89 people, 68 of whom are women. Even more powerfully, the six single mothers in the study became employers themselves. Mrs. Z, who later divorced her husband after discovering his infidelity, found a new sense of purpose in her role as a business owner:

"I caught my husband cheated... I was so heartbroken, I asked Allah to give me strength and what's the goal of my life. After praying, I saw the kitchen and looked on how 3 women were working under me. I said thank you Allah, this is His answer for my prayer. If I am not strong, how about the 3 women who work and depend on me? Ya Allah, Alhamdulillah."

In becoming employers and community leaders, these women forged new social identities based on economic independence and mutual responsibility, providing a potent example of female autonomy and resilience.

## 4. Discussion

This study's findings illuminate how Depo Lestari, a seemingly modest community store, functions as a potent site of grassroots resilience for displaced Banjar women. The ethnographic evidence reveals a model of economic and social empowerment that emerges organically from within the community, standing in stark contrast to the formal, top-down development programs that have largely failed to reach them. This discussion interprets these findings through the theoretical lenses of community economies and feminist political ecology, arguing that Depo Lestari represents a form of feminist community economics that actively counters the gendered dispossession of post-extractive capitalism.

### 4.1. Depo lestari as a "diverse economy" in action

The economic life of Depo Lestari provides a vivid, real-world illustration of J.K. Gibson-Graham's [40] concept of a 'diverse economy'. A conventional economic analysis, with its "capitalocentric" focus on formal wage labor and market transactions, would largely render the activities within the hub invisible [49-51]. However, our findings show that the community's survival is sustained by a rich tapestry of economic practices that operate alongside and outside of formal capitalism. The non-cash mechanisms of support, informal credit, flexible payment terms, and the provision of free equipment are not marginal activities; they are the core infrastructure that enables these women to participate in the economy. This can be visualized using an iceberg model (Figure 1), where the visible tip represents formal market transactions, but the vast, submerged base is composed of the community-sustaining practices

of informal credit, mutual aid, and social reproduction that our results have detailed.

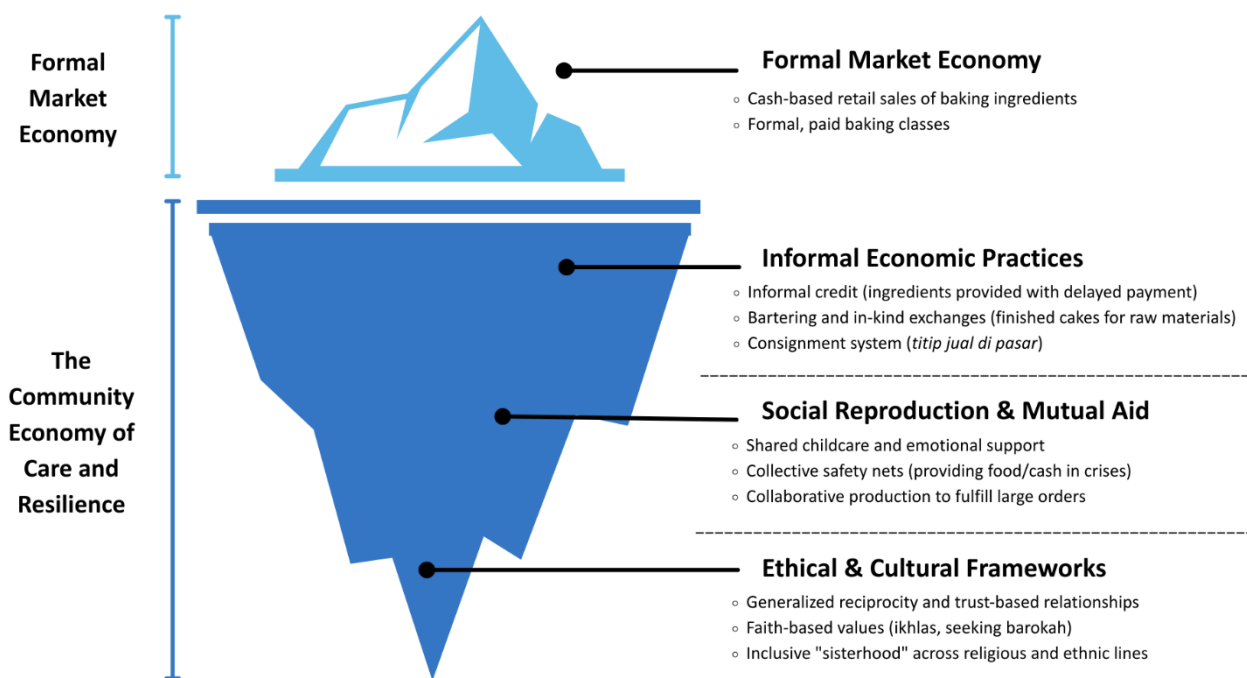


Figure 1. The diverse economy of depo Lestari (an iceberg model).

Furthermore, the constant flow of mutual aid and collaboration, such as subcontracting orders and sharing childcare, exemplifies what economic anthropologists' term "generalized reciprocity" [52-54]. These are not immediate, calculated exchanges but are part of a long-term social fabric built on trust and mutual obligation [55]. This ethic of reciprocity is the social glue that holds the diverse economy together, creating a collective safety net that is far more responsive to the community's needs than any external aid program [56-58].

Depo Lestari thus challenges conventional views of "the economy" not as a singular, monolithic capitalist system, but as a pluralistic space where a multitude of economic forms, many of them grounded in care and social relationships, are constantly being enacted.

4.2. Feminist resistance through "quiet agency"

The practices at Depo Lestari can be understood as a form of feminist resistance to the gendered impacts of extractive development, a central concern of Feminist Political Ecology (FPE). The literature on extractive industries is replete with narratives of women as victims of land dispossession, increased workloads, and patriarchal reinforcement [11,12]. While this study confirms these initial conditions, its primary contribution is to document a powerful counter-narrative of agency. The women of Depo

Lestari are not passive victims; they are active agents forging their own solutions.

Their resistance, however, is not typically enacted through overt, public protest. Instead, it manifests as a form of "quiet agency" or "everyday resistance". By building a self-sustaining economic world rooted in their own cultural and ethical values, such as *ikhlas* (sincerity) and seeking *barokah* (blessing); they create a moral economy that implicitly rejects the extractive, profit-maximizing logic of the corporate economy that displaced them. The transformation of the Baking Centre into a space that actively counters the cultural norm of *supan* (shyness) is a particularly potent example. By creating an environment where women feel empowered to ask questions and build confidence, the hub is cultivating the very psychological resources needed to challenge their marginalization.

4.3. Reconfiguring patriarchy and forging new social identities

The study's findings on the relational shifts within households offer a nuanced contribution to the understanding of gender dynamics in Banjar society. The evidence that 56 of the married participants reported their husbands becoming active, supportive partners in their businesses directly challenges the static image of a rigidly patriarchal culture. This suggests that when women gain economic authority and control over household finances, it can

create the conditions for a renegotiation of traditional gender roles, moving toward a more collaborative domestic partnership.

Even more striking is the emergence of new forms of female leadership, exemplified by the six single mothers who became employers in their own right. In a patriarchal context where a woman's social status is often tied to her marital relationships, their success in building businesses and creating employment for other women represents a radical redefinition of female autonomy and social value. Mrs. Z's powerful realization that her responsibility to her female employees gave her the strength to leave an unfaithful husband is a profound testament to this shift. These women transcend entrepreneurship, forging new social identities and modeling a form of female leadership that is independent of patriarchal structures.

#### 4.4. Implications for theory and policy

Theoretically, this study contributes to a productive synthesis of Feminist Political Ecology and community economics scholarship. It demonstrates how the grassroots, non-capitalist practices identified by community economics theorists can function as a direct, gendered response to the structural violence and dispossession analyzed by

FPE scholars. Depo Lestari is, in effect, a community economy born from the failures of a post-extractive one.

The policy implications are equally significant. The findings underscore the profound inadequacy of "gender-blind" development programs and sustainability initiatives that fail to engage with the informal economies where the most marginalized women operate.

This research strongly suggests that a more effective approach to empowerment would be to shift focus from designing new, top-down interventions to identifying, understanding, and supporting existing, organic hubs of resilience like Depo Lestari.

Rather than attempting to create empowerment from the outside, development agencies and policymakers should seek to amplify the "quiet agency" that is already thriving at the grassroots level.

Taken together, the findings of this study can be synthesized into a conceptual model of grassroots resilience (Figure 2). This model illustrates the causal pathway from the structural pressures of a post-extractive economy to the enactment of a feminist community economy, which ultimately produces transformative economic and social outcomes.

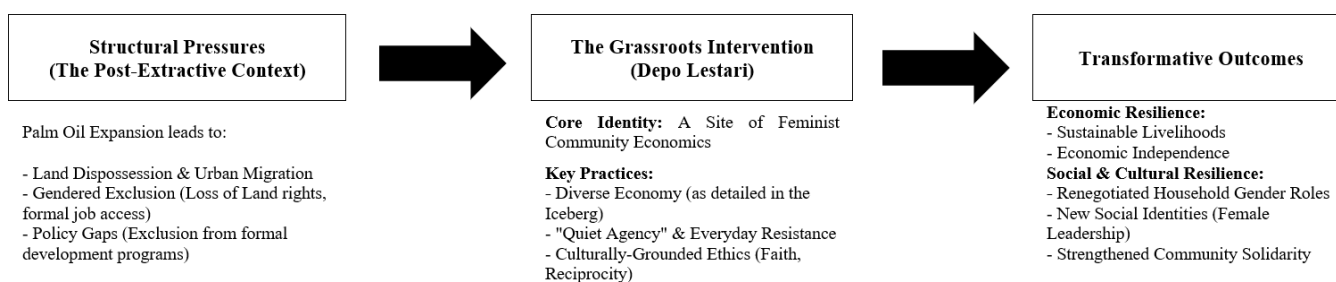


Figure 2. A model of feminist community economics as a response to dispossession.

### 5. Limitations and future research

As a qualitative case study, this research provides depth and nuance rather than statistical generalizability. The findings from Depo Lestari are deeply embedded in the specific cultural and economic context of Banjarmasin, and further research is needed to explore whether similar models of resilience exist in other post-extractive communities. The researcher's positionality as a partial outsider, though managed through reflexivity, inevitably shapes the interpretation of the data.

This study opens several avenues for future research. Comparative studies of other women-led community hubs across Indonesia and Southeast Asia could identify common patterns and context-specific variations in grassroots empowerment strategies. Quantitative research could build on these findings to measure the economic impact of such hubs on household income, poverty reduction, and children's educational outcomes. Finally, longitudinal research could track the evolution of these community

economies over time, examining how they interact with, resist, or are co-opted by formal state and market forces.

### 6. Conclusion

This study has examined the story of Depo Lestari, grassroots, woman-led hub in Banjarmasin, as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant literature on gendered dispossession in post-extractive economies. In a context where the expansion of the palm oil industry has led to profound social, economic, and cultural dislocation, this research asked how displaced Indigenous Banjar women forge pathways to resilience. The findings demonstrate that Depo Lestari is far more than a site of survival; it is a space where a vibrant and sustainable feminist community economy is actively being built.

By centering their economic practices on culturally specific values of reciprocity, mutual aid, and faith-based ethics, the women of Depo Lestari have created a "diverse economy" that operates largely outside of formal state and market structures. This moral economy, grounded in social reproduction and care, has not only provided them

with sustainable livelihoods but has also become a site for reconfiguring patriarchal gender roles and cultivating new forms of female leadership.

The central contribution of this paper is to make visible a form of "quiet agency" an everyday, collective resistance that challenges the structural violence of post-extractive capitalism not through overt protest, but through the deliberate construction of an alternative economic and social world. The case of Depo Lestari offers a crucial lesson for both theory and policy. It underscores the importance of looking beyond narratives of victimhood to recognize the creative and resilient strategies that marginalized communities develop on their own terms. Ultimately, this study argues that supporting these existing, organic hubs of empowerment may be a far more effective pathway toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals than imposing top-down, gender-blind development models that consistently fail to reach those who need them most.

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