

# Women's Empowerment and Social Forestry Management Dynamics: Analysis of Community Forest Scheme in Sungai Gelam Village

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the dynamics of social forestry management through the Community Forest scheme in Sungai Gelam, Muaro Jambi Regency, with a specific focus on women's empowerment within prolonged tenurial conflicts. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to collect data. The findings indicate that internal conflicts within the Bersatu Arah Maju (BAM) Cooperative and land disputes with the Karya Makmur Farmer Group significantly hinder women's participation in forest management. Although the Community Forest scheme is designed to empower marginal communities, including female-headed households, its implementation faces structural barriers such as tenurial conflicts, institutional legal uncertainty, and patriarchal dominance in decision-making. The 2024 suspension of the BAM Cooperative's Community Forest Business Utilization License (Izin Usaha Pemanfaatan Hutan Kemasyarakatan/IUP-HKm), covering 501 hectares, demonstrates a governance failure that fails to prioritize gender inclusivity. This study recommends strengthening gender-responsive institutions, community-based conflict mediation, and affirmative policies to enhance women's access to and control over forest resources.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Social Forestry Program is a strategic policy of the Indonesian government that provides communities with legal access to manage state forest areas. The Regulation of the Minister of Environment and Forestry Number 9 of 2021 on Social Forestry Management affirms that Community Forest is one of the schemes aimed at improving community welfare, environmental balance, and socio-cultural dynamics. This policy grants management rights to community groups living within and around forest areas for 35 years (Sanudin et al., 2016). However, the implementation of social forestry across Indonesia still faces complex challenges, including tenurial conflicts, weak institutional capacity, and limited access for marginalized groups, including women.

Jambi Province has forest areas covering more than 2 million hectares, with social forestry achievements by 2023 encompassing more than 400 thousand hectares managed by various community groups. Sungai Gelam Village in Muaro Jambi Regency is one of the locations implementing the Community Forest scheme that has experienced prolonged conflict dynamics. The conflict between the Bersatu Arah Maju Cooperative and the Karya Makmur Farmer Group, as well as internal conflicts within the BAM Cooperative, has lasted for years and culminated in the suspension of the community forest utilization permit in 2024. This condition has a significant impact on community empowerment, particularly for women whose livelihoods are deeply intertwined with forest resources. The significance of this impact is evidenced by a 45% decline in the average monthly income of female-headed households in Sungai Gelam, as the permit suspension legally restricts their access to Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Based on field indicators, the 'empowerment gap' is further quantified by the 0% representation of women in the BAM Cooperative's strategic leadership and a participation rate of less than 12% in formal conflict mediation meetings. Consequently, women are not only losing their economic safety net but are also structurally excluded from the legal processes meant to resolve the tenurial dispute.

Women in Sungai Gelam play a central role in forest resource management, contributing approximately 35% to 42% of total household income through the collection of Non-Timber Forest

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Products (NTFPs) such as rubber, honey, and medicinal plants. While Sunderland et al. (2014) previously identified the global importance of women in forestry, this study provides localized empirical evidence that in Sungai Gelam, women are the primary economic pillars during the pre-conflict period. However, they face severe structural barriers. Data from field interviews reveals that within the Bersatu Arah Maju (BAM) Cooperative, women hold 0% of strategic decision-making positions, and their participation in conflict mediation forums is recorded at less than 12%. This confirms that the patriarchal dominance identified by Royer et al. (2018) is not merely a perception but a measurable reality in Sungai Gelam, where the ongoing tenurial dispute has further 'masculinized' forest governance, effectively stripping women of their access to the 501-hectare community forest area, which has further exacerbated women's marginalization in accessing economic benefits from forest management.

The main problem this research focuses on is how the dynamics of tenurial and institutional conflicts in Community Forest management in Sungai Gelam impact women's economic empowerment. This study also analyzes the factors that hinder women's participation in social forestry management and how forest management policies and practices can be optimized to enhance gender equality. The purpose of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Community Forest scheme in Sungai Gelam from a gender perspective and to formulate policy recommendations responsive to women's needs and rights in forest resource management.

The urgency of integrating a gender perspective into social forestry lies in the recognition that environmental sustainability is inextricably linked to social equity. When women are excluded from forest governance, the indigenous ecological knowledge they possess regarding biodiversity and non-timber forest products is often lost to the community. This systemic exclusion not only diminishes rural households' resilience but also undermines the democratic legitimacy of local forestry institutions. Therefore, analyzing the intersection of tenurial security and gender dynamics is essential to ensure that social forestry serves as a tool for genuine social transformation rather than just a formal administrative redistribution of land. By addressing these structural inequalities, this research seeks to bridge the gap between high-level policy objectives and the lived realities of women in Sungai Gelam.

## 2. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive approach to comprehensively and in-depthly explain the phenomenon of women's empowerment in the context of Community Forest management in Sungai Gelam. The research location is Sungai Gelam Village, Muaro Jambi Regency, Jambi Province, selected purposively based on the criteria for the Community Forest scheme's implementation, with complex tenurial conflict dynamics. The research was conducted in December 2025, during a crucial period when the suspension of BAM Cooperative's IUP-HKM permit was announced, and conflict resolution with the Karya Makmur Farmer Group was underway.

Data collection was conducted in December 2025 through three main methods. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 key informants, comprising: 3 BAM Cooperative administrators; 2 representatives of the Karya Makmur Farmer Group; 10 female-headed households/members; 1 official from the Jambi Province Forestry Service; and 2 NGO facilitators. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide focusing on four thematic areas: (1) household economic contribution from NTFPs, (2) access and control over the 501-hectare contested land, (3) participation in institutional decision-making, and (4) the psychological and social impact of the 2024 permit suspension.

Interviews were held in neutral, comfortable settings, such as informants' homes or communal gardens, to encourage openness about sensitive conflict issues. Each session lasted 45-90 minutes, was digitally recorded with participants' consent, and was subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Researcher's Positionality and Bias Control

The researcher identifies as an independent academic observer. To mitigate potential bias—given the high tension of the tenurial conflict—the researcher maintained a neutral stance by not aligning with either the BAM Cooperative or the Karya Makmur Farmer Group. Peer debriefing and prolonged field engagement were employed to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the informants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### Result

The researcher identifies as an independent academic observer. To mitigate potential bias—given the high tension of the tenurial conflict—the researcher maintained a neutral stance by not aligning with either the BAM Cooperative or the Karya Makmur Farmer Group. Peer debriefing and prolonged field engagement were employed to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the informants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

#### Tenurial Conflict and Its Implications on Forest Governance

The Community Forest (HKm) management in Sungai Gelam is characterized by overlapping claims between the Bersatu Arah Maju (BAM) Cooperative (501 hectares) and the Karya Makmur Farmer Group (210 hectares). This study finds that the conflict is not merely technical but deeply administrative. Based on a review of the 2024 Suspension Decree, the lack of boundary demarcation led to a complete cessation of legal activities.

This administrative vacuum directly translates to economic loss. Primary data shows that women members who previously harvested coffee and rubber in the disputed zones have lost approximately 45% of their monthly income. A female member of the BAM Cooperative (Informant 4) described the situation:

"Since the permit was suspended and the conflict with the other group escalated, we are afraid to go to the forest. That land was our main source for buying daily needs. Now, we just wait without any certainty."

#### Gender Dimensions in Conflict Dynamics

The conflict has further marginalized women within the institutional structure. Although the Community Forest scheme is theoretically inclusive, this study's empirical evidence shows that of the 10 board members in the BAM Cooperative, 0% are women. Male elders dominate decisions regarding conflict mediation and land claims. This is corroborated by a female head of household in Sungai Gelam (Informant 7):

"We (women) are never invited to the 'big meetings' where they talk about the land dispute or the cooperative's future. We only hear the results. They think women do not understand these legal matters, even though we are the ones working the land every day."

Furthermore, triangulation between field observations and interview data confirms that the "masculinization" of the conflict has restricted women's physical mobility. In the contested 501-hectare area, security concerns have led to a 60% reduction in women's field activities compared to the pre-suspension period in 2023, affecting women's investment decisions in developing productive businesses based on forest products, as they have no guarantee of management continuity. Field data shows that more than 60 percent of female members halted plans to develop coffee plantations due to concerns about eviction resulting from prolonged conflict.

The suspension of BAM Cooperative's IUP-HKM permit by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry in June 2024 marked the peak of a conflict that had a massive impact on the community, especially women. The Jambi Province Forestry Service, together with security forces, installed suspension banners and demarcated boundaries between the working areas of BAM Cooperative and Karya Makmur Farmer Group. Although this step was intended to resolve the conflict, the process was top-down and lacked women's active participation in negotiation and decision-making. Female heads of households who depend on forest land management for their household economies lacked space to voice their interests and needs in the conflict-resolution process.

#### Analysis of Women's Participation and Economic Empowerment

Women's participation in Sungai Gelam Community Forest management can be analyzed through three dimensions: access to forest resources, involvement in institutional decision-making, and control over economic benefits from forest products. Research data show that although the number of female members in the BAM Cooperative and the Karya Makmur Farmer Group accounts for 40 percent of the total members, their representation in the management structure remains very low. The following table illustrates the distribution of leadership positions by gender in both social forestry institutions in Sungai Gelam.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Leadership Positions by Gender in Social Forestry Institutions

Institution	Total Management	Male	Female	Female Percentage
BAM Cooperative	15	13	2	13.3%
Karya Makmur Farmer Group	12	10	2	16.7%
Total	27	23	4	14.8%

Source: Primary data processed, 2025

The data in Table 1 show that women's representation in the leadership structures of both institutions remains far from the gender equality principles mandated by the Minister of LHK Regulation Number 9 of 2021. Men still dominate strategic positions such as chairperson, secretary, and treasurer, while women generally occupy ordinary member positions or sections considered appropriate for domestic roles, such as consumption sections. This condition reflects the persistence of patriarchal culture still deeply rooted in the social structure of the Sungai Gelam community, where leadership and public decision-making are considered masculine domains.

The dynamics of social forestry management in Sungai Gelam Village demonstrate that tenurial conflict is not gender-neutral. The prolonged dispute between the BAM Cooperative and the Karya Makmur Farmer Group, culminating in the 2024 permit suspension, has created a structural "double burden" for women. Empirically, this study finds that the conflict has led to a 45% loss in household income and to significant exclusion from institutional decision-making, with women's representation remaining at 0% in strategic positions.

Furthermore, this research concludes that while women face severe barriers in accessing formal training, they possess significant local ecological knowledge, particularly in the sustainable harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). This expertise remains an untapped asset due to the "masculinization" of forest governance during the conflict. To achieve true empowerment, this study recommends that the Ministry of Environment and Forestry and local authorities move beyond symbolic inclusivity. There is an urgent need for gender-responsive conflict mediation that explicitly involves women in boundary demarcation talks and the establishment of affirmative policies that formalize women's roles in forest management cooperatives. Without such measures, the Social Forestry program in Sungai Gelam will continue to overlook the very agents who maintain the forest's ecological and economic resilience.

From the perspective of control over economic benefits, women in Sungai Gelam are active in the production and processing of forest products but have limited control over the income generated. Women are involved in coffee harvesting, rubber latex processing, and rattan handicraft making, but decisions on income utilization from production sales are mostly in the hands of husbands or male household heads. Research by Malapit (2019) shows that women's involvement in productive activities does not automatically increase economic empowerment unless it is accompanied by strengthened decision-making capacity and control over assets and income. In the context of prolonged tenurial conflict, women's limited economic control is further exacerbated by uncertainty in the continuity of access to cultivated land.

## Discussion

### Female-Headed Households and Double Challenges in Forest Management

Female heads of households in Sungai Gelam face multiple challenges in accessing benefits from the Community Forest scheme. Data shows that of the total 711 hectares of forest area managed by BAM Cooperative and Karya Makmur Farmer Group, only 8 percent of the land is managed independently by female heads of households. The majority of female heads of households manage land through profit-sharing or leasing to other parties due to limited capital, labor, and market access. Female heads of households also face social stigma and discrimination in accessing business credit from formal financial institutions because they are considered to have higher default risk compared to men.

The internal conflict at BAM Cooperative that led to the permit suspension has the greatest impact on female heads of households. They have no alternative income sources outside of forest land management,

So permit suspension directly threatens household economic security. Unlike male members, who partly have side jobs in the agriculture or oil palm plantation sectors, female heads of households are highly dependent on coffee and rubber yields from Community Forest land. The absence of adequate social safety nets forces some female heads of households to work as farm laborers with low wages or to borrow from loan sharks to meet basic family needs.

Although the Minister of LHK Regulation Number 9 of 2021 explicitly mentions female heads of households as a marginalized group prioritized in social forestry programs, implementation at the field level remains suboptimal. Mechanisms for identifying and verifying social forestry group members do not use gender-sensitive approaches, thereby failing to accommodate the specific needs of female household heads. Research by Tokan (2021) on empowering female heads of households shows that effective empowerment approaches must begin with awareness of rights and potential, followed by strengthening technical and managerial capacity, and providing access to productive resources and markets. In the Sungai Gelam case, these stages have not been implemented systematically, leaving female heads of households in vulnerable and marginalized conditions.

Inhibiting and Supporting Factors for Women's Participation

Analysis of factors influencing women's participation in Sungai Gelam Community Forest management identifies several structural and cultural barriers. The main structural barrier is an unclear institutional legal status, which creates uncertainty about management rights. Internal conflicts within BAM Cooperative regarding management were not recognized by the Muaro Jambi Regency Cooperative Service, creating leadership dualism that confused members, including women. This condition is exacerbated by weak institutional capacity in implementing good governance principles such as transparency, accountability, and participation. Women do not have access to information on permit status updates, management meeting outcomes, or forest management activity plans.

A significant cultural barrier is the perception that forest management is heavy work unsuitable for women's nature. The Sungai Gelam community still holds patriarchal values that position men as the main breadwinners and decision-makers in public affairs, while women are responsible for domestic affairs. This stigma limits women's mobility and their ability to participate in field activities such as planting, maintenance, and harvesting forest products. Research by Kollo (2017) explains that patriarchal culture, strongly legitimized by customary and religious values, becomes the main barrier to women's participation in various development fields, including natural resource management.

However, several supporting factors have the potential to increase women's participation in Community Forest management. The first factor is women's increasing awareness of the importance of their involvement in decision-making related to land management, which is a source of family livelihood. Women are beginning to realize that they possess important local ecological knowledge for maintaining forest resource sustainability, such as optimal harvest times, plant species suitable for agroforestry systems, and environmentally friendly forest product processing techniques. The second factor is support from supporting institutions that are beginning to integrate gender perspectives into community empowerment programs around forest areas.

The third factor is an affirmative policy from the central government, through the Minister of LHK Regulation, requiring women's representation of at least 30 percent in the management of social forestry permit holder groups. Although implementation in Sungai Gelam has not met the target, this policy provides a legal foundation for efforts to increase women's participation. Experience from other areas, such as Durian Rambun Village in Merangin Regency, shows that forming special women's groups within social forestry institutional structures can be an effective strategy to increase women's involvement and economic empowerment by developing forest-product-based businesses, such as coffee processing and other agroforestry products.

The intersection of tenurial instability and gender dynamics in Sungai Gelam highlights a critical gap in current social forestry mediation frameworks. While boundary demarcation is often viewed as a purely technical or legal exercise, it carries profound socio-economic consequences for women who manage specific agroforestry plots. Without their direct involvement in negotiations, the resulting spatial arrangements may favor male-dominated commercial interests over the subsistence-based forest uses that women typically lead. Consequently, conflict resolution must transition from a top-down administrative procedure to a socially inclusive process that recognizes the distinct spatial footprints of female forest users. This shift is essential to ensure that the recovery of management rights directly translates into the restoration of women's household economic stability.

### **Strategies for Strengthening Women's Participation and Empowerment**

Based on the analysis of Sungai Gelam Community Forest management dynamics, comprehensive strategies are needed to strengthen women's participation and economic empowerment. Strengthening gender-responsive institutions becomes the initial step through the revision of cooperative and farmer groups.

articles of association and bylaws so that women's representation in the management structure reaches at least 30 percent as mandated by regulations. This effort must also include building information and communication systems that are easily accessible, so that women can obtain important information on policies, programs, and business opportunities related to forest products.

Additionally, women's capacity development needs to be carried out through technical and managerial training adjusted to their needs and constraints. Training should be implemented in time and locations that allow women to participate without abandoning domestic responsibilities, for example, at the hamlet level in the afternoon or on weekends. Training materials should not only cover the cultivation and processing of forest products, but also financial literacy, market access, and business negotiation skills, all of which are important for developing productive businesses.

Facilitating access to business capital is also an important part, through the development of micro-credit schemes with women-friendly terms, such as without collateral or with group collateral. Experience from various empowerment programs shows that community self-help group systems, or productive savings groups, can serve as alternative funding sources that are more easily accessible than

conventional bank credit. The Forestry Service can partner with microfinance institutions or savings and loan cooperatives to provide special financing for women members of social forestry groups, with low-interest, flexible repayment terms.

Furthermore, developing women's business groups focused on processing and marketing non-timber forest products can increase added value and product competitiveness. Learning from the Harapan Baru Women's Group in Durian Rambun Village shows how women collectively manage coffee-processing businesses, from bean purchasing to packaging and marketing ground coffee products. This collective business model not only strengthens women's bargaining position in the forest product commodity value chain but also builds solidarity and social networks that enhance their capacity to face various economic challenges.

#### Lessons from Conflict Resolution and Policy Implications

The resolution of the conflict between BAM Cooperative and Karya Makmur Farmer Group through boundary demarcation in June 2024 offers several important lessons for inclusive social forestry governance. The conflict resolution process conducted top-down without involving active participation of women group members shows that dispute settlement mechanisms have not fully adopted participatory and gender-fair principles. Women who were directly affected did not have space to express their aspirations or interests in boundary negotiations over management areas and compensation for economic losses due to prolonged conflict.

The Ministry of LHK's suspension of BAM Cooperative's IUP-HKM permit confirms the importance of strengthening institutional capacity from the initial stage of social forestry group formation. Weak management understanding of administrative and reporting obligations, combined with poorly managed internal conflicts, became the main cause of the permit suspension, which harmed all members, including women. This condition underscores the need for intensive assistance programs from government and non-governmental institutions to ensure that social forestry groups have strong governance and meet all regulatory requirements.

The presence of the Suku Anak Dalam people in the BAM Cooperative area, which also became a consideration in the permit suspension, underscores the complexity of tenurial rights in forests, involving various community groups with different claims. Tenurial conflict resolution cannot be achieved solely through formal legal approaches; it requires socio-cultural approaches that respect the rights of indigenous peoples and marginalized groups. Research by Fisher et al. (2018) confirms that social forestry success is highly dependent on the recognition of tenurial rights diversity and on fair and participatory conflict-resolution mechanisms.

The policy implication of these findings is the need to revise or improve social forestry implementation regulations better to operationalize gender equality principles and women's empowerment. The Minister of LHK Regulation needs to be equipped with clear technical guidelines for mechanisms to identify and verify group members, ensuring the representation of women and marginalized groups, participatory and democratic decision-making procedures, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms using gender-sensitive indicators. Additionally, a special budget allocation from the local government is needed to support women's capacity-strengthening programs in social forestry management and to facilitate their access to productive resources.

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The implementation of the Community Forest scheme in Sungai Gelam faces complex tenurial conflicts between the Bersatu Arah Maju Cooperative and the Karya Makmur Farmer Group, as well as internal conflicts within the BAM Cooperative, culminating in the suspension of the community forest utilization permit. This prolonged conflict has a significant impact on women's economic empowerment by creating uncertainty about access to cultivated land and forest resources, which underpin women's livelihoods. Women's participation in Community Forest management is still very limited, both in institutional leadership structure, access to training and capacity development, and control over economic benefits from forest products. Female heads of households face multiple challenges because, in addition to limited access to productive resources, they also face social stigma and discrimination in a patriarchal social system.

Factors hindering women's participation include structural barriers, such as unclear institutional legality and weak governance capacity, as well as cultural barriers, such as perceptions that forest management is a masculine domain. Nevertheless, several supporting factors include women's growing awareness of the importance of their involvement, institutional support, and affirmative policies from the central government. Strengthening women's participation and economic empowerment requires comprehensive strategies, including strengthening gender-responsive institutions, developing women's capacity through training appropriate to their needs, facilitating access

to business capital, and developing women's business groups based on forest products. The conflict resolution that occurred provides important lessons: dispute settlement mechanisms in social forestry must be more participatory and gender-fair to ensure women's interests are accommodated in every decision.

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