

EVALUATION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH WOMEN FARMERS' GROUPS IN SANGKUNUR VILLAGE, ANGKOLA SANGKUNUR DISTRICT, SOUTH TAPANULI REGENCY

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the implementation of a women's empowerment program carried out through the Mandiri Women Farmers Group in Sangkunur Sub-district, including the challenges encountered and the strategies adopted to ensure the sustainability of the program. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Research informants included representatives from the Agricultural Office, village government officials, agricultural extension workers, and members of the farmers group. The findings indicate that the program has enhanced members' knowledge and skills in agricultural practices while also contributing to increased household income. However, group activities have declined due to decreased member participation, limited financial resources, and suboptimal collaboration with external stakeholders. Therefore, strengthening the program is necessary through targeted training, continuous mentoring, and support from the government and community leaders. Through these efforts, the Mandiri Women Farmers Group is expected to regain its optimal role as a platform for women's empowerment and to contribute to sustainable rural development.

Key words: Empowerment; Women; Farmers' Groups; Program Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

As a developing country, Indonesia continues to strive toward achieving developed-nation status, one of the key indicators of which is reflected in the quality of human resources and the synergy between government and society in promoting national development. A substantial proportion of the Indonesian population still depends on the agricultural sector for their livelihoods, including food crop farming, plantations, fisheries, and other related activities. Therefore, the utilization of agricultural resources such as land, labor, water, and other

supporting inputs must be managed efficiently and sustainably to prevent resource degradation and declining agricultural productivity.

One of the fundamental pillars of sustainable development is women's empowerment. Women, who constitute nearly half of Indonesia's total population, play a strategic role in economic, social, and cultural domains. Data from Statistics Indonesia indicate that in 2022 Indonesia's population reached 273,879,750 people, of whom 135,576,278 were women, accounting for approximately 49.5% of the total population (BPS, 2022). Women's empowerment is understood as an effort to build women's capacity and strength through increasing awareness of their potential and enhancing their skills, thereby improving their roles and positions across various aspects of life.

The objectives of women's empowerment include enhancing women's roles and status within families, communities, and the state; strengthening women's participation in decision-making processes; fostering the independence of women's organizations; increasing institutional commitment to gender equality; and promoting family welfare and child protection. Nevertheless, women continue to face various structural barriers, such as unequal access to education, health services, and economic opportunities. Within the development context, women often bear dual roles as household managers and productive laborers, particularly in the agricultural sector. Statistics Indonesia reports that approximately 31.86% of the Indonesian workforce was employed in agriculture in 2022, with a substantial proportion consisting of women (BPS, 2022).

The establishment of women farmers' groups represents one strategic approach to addressing these inequalities. Through such groups, women are able to share knowledge, expand access to productive resources, and enhance household economic capacity. Numerous studies have demonstrated that women's empowerment in agriculture not only increases household income but also contributes to improvements in children's health and education. Accordingly, women farmers' groups function not only as platforms for agricultural training but also as arenas for advocating women's access to and rights over productive resources.

In Sangkunur Village, Angkola Sangkunur District, South Tapanuli Regency, farmer groups have developed since 2004, with a total of seven groups currently in existence. One of these is the *Mandiri Women Farmers' Group*, established in 2013. Initially comprising 36 members, the group now has 27 active members due to group fragmentation, residential mobility, and mortality. The formation of this group was driven not only by community initiative but also by guidance from the local Agricultural Office, with the primary objectives of empowering women and improving access to agricultural production inputs.

During its early phase, the *Mandiri Women Farmers' Group* actively implemented agricultural field schools and held regular monthly meetings focused on enhancing food crop cultivation skills, particularly for rice and maize. These activities also included collective garden management and deliberative meetings as forums for evaluation and joint planning. However, over time, the intensity of group activities declined and eventually ceased due to member fatigue, limited financial resources, and decreasing participation.

Despite these challenges, the *Mandiri Women Farmers' Group* continues to exist and remains formally recognized by the local government, as indicated by its continued access to fertilizer and seed assistance. This condition suggests that the empowerment program previously implemented has had a long-term impact, although its outcomes have not yet been optimal. Weak organizational capacity, limited member skills, and restricted access to training and technology have resulted in continued dependence on external assistance, constraining the group's ability to function effectively as an agent of change at the community level. Based on these conditions, this study focuses on evaluating women's empowerment through the *Mandiri Women Farmers' Group* in Sangkunur Village.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The descriptive-analytical qualitative approach is intended to explore and develop an in-depth understanding of the social phenomena under investigation through the collection of narrative data, verbal expressions, and observable behaviors. This approach enables the researcher to systematically present empirical conditions in the field while simultaneously analyzing research findings to generate a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena studied (Puansah, 2017, 2024, 2025; Puansah et al., n.d., 2006, 2025; Puansah, Parapat, et al., 2023; Puansah, Pulungan, et al., 2023, 2024; Puansah, Sukmana, et al., 2024; Puansah & Parapat, n.d.; Puansah & Ritonga, 2020; Puansya et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evaluation

The term *evaluation* refers to the assessment or appraisal of a program, policy, or activity. Evaluation is a systematic process designed to collect, analyze, and present information in order to assess the value, effectiveness, and impact of a program based on predetermined indicators. Evaluation not only focuses on final outcomes but also encompasses the entire implementation process, thereby providing a basis for determining whether a program should be continued, improved, or terminated (Munthe; 2015).

Empowerment

Empowerment refers to the process of enhancing the capacity and strength of individuals or groups who are in disadvantaged positions so that they can become self-reliant. Conceptually, empowerment is derived from the term *power*, which denotes authority or capability, and is oriented toward strengthening social capital, trust, adherence to norms, and social networks. According to Mardikanto and Soebiato, empowerment constitutes a series of activities aimed at strengthening the capacity of marginalized groups to enable their participation, improve access to resources, and enhance their quality of life. Empowerment encompasses the fulfillment of basic needs, access to productive resources, and involvement in development-related decision-making processes (Voges, M; 2016).

Gender Theory

The concept of gender is introduced to distinguish between biological differences (innate characteristics) of women and men and socially constructed roles shaped by cultural norms. Gender differences encompass the division of roles, responsibilities, and social functions, which are inherently dynamic and subject to change according to cultural and environmental contexts (Dalimoenthe; 2021). In gender studies, three main theoretical approaches are commonly identified: the *nurture* theory, which views gender differences as social constructions; the *nature* theory, which emphasizes biological differences as inherent; and the *equilibrium* theory, which highlights partnership and complementary relationships between women and men in social life. This equilibrium approach underscores that gender relations should ideally be built upon principles of equal and harmonious cooperation (You, Y; 2021).

Definition of Women

Women are human beings of the female sex who possess certain biological characteristics as innate conditions, such as reproductive functions, which are permanent in nature. Socially and culturally, women are often associated with traits such as gentleness, nurturance, and emotionality. However, in essence, women possess equal potential, strength, and capacity to actively participate in economic and social life. Therefore, women can be understood as resilient, independent, and empowered individuals when they are provided with equal opportunities and access (Fujiati, D; 2016).

Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment refers to efforts to enhance women's capacities to gain access to and control over economic, social, political, and cultural resources, thereby strengthening their self-confidence and decision-making abilities. The empowerment process is carried out through critical awareness of gender-based discriminatory practices and the reinforcement of women's roles within social and development structures. Women's empowerment is understood as both a process and an objective, aimed at promoting social transformation toward gender justice and equality (Nur, S; 2017).

Women farmers' groups are agricultural collectives whose members consist of women who voluntarily unite based on shared needs and common interests within a specific locality. These groups function as platforms for learning, cooperation, and the strengthening of women's roles in the agricultural sector. The existence of women farmers' groups aims to enhance agricultural productivity, promote women's economic self-reliance, and improve family welfare through the collective utilization of resources (Isnaeni, N; 2023).

Women farmers' groups are generally informal in nature, comprising members with similar farming objectives and activities, and are characterized by mutual trust and solidarity. The primary functions of women farmers' groups include: (1) serving as learning forums to

improve members' knowledge and skills, (2) acting as mechanisms for cooperation to strengthen the efficiency and resilience of farming enterprises, and (3) functioning as production units that enable the achievement of sustainable economic scale in agricultural activities (Widya, A; 2016).

Research Findings and Discussion

The results of field observations and data analysis indicate that the *Mandiri Women Farmers' Group* in Sangkunur Village, during its initial phase of establishment, represented a relatively successful practice of women's empowerment in the agricultural sector. The group was formed in 2013 with facilitation from the Agricultural Office and support from the village government. It initially consisted of 36 members and currently has 27 active members. The group functioned as a platform for enhancing agricultural knowledge, accessing production input assistance, and providing opportunities for women's participation in strengthening household economic activities.

In its early period, the group implemented a one-year agricultural field school, managed a long bean communal garden, and held monthly meetings as forums for evaluation and collective planning. These activities contributed to the improvement of cultivation skills—such as fertilization practices, pest control, and efficient land use—while simultaneously strengthening solidarity and women's roles in group decision-making processes. The group also regularly prepared the Definitive Group Needs Plan (RDKK) as an instrument to access government-subsidized fertilizers and seeds.

Over time, however, group activities declined significantly: the agricultural field school was discontinued, regular meetings ceased, and the communal garden was no longer managed productively. This decline was influenced by member fatigue due to monotonous routines, limited operational funding, and difficulties in mobilizing members because of personal commitments. Nevertheless, the group has continued to exist administratively, particularly through the ongoing preparation of the RDKK and continued receipt of fertilizer and seed assistance. This condition indicates that institutional recognition remains in place, although the group's empowerment function has not operated optimally.

At the institutional level, Sangkunur Village has seven farmer groups that remain administratively active, consisting of five male-dominated groups and two women-managed groups. All groups focus primarily on rice and maize cultivation, in line with the local agro-ecosystem characteristics. These findings demonstrate that the agricultural institutional structure is relatively well maintained; however, the dynamics of group activities face sustainability challenges, thereby necessitating program evaluation and revitalization of organizational capacity.

The discussion focuses on three main aspects: (1) the benefits obtained by members from the women's empowerment program through women farmers' groups, (2) the factors contributing to the cessation of group activities, and (3) efforts to enhance program sustainability. Data were collected through interviews with representatives of the Agricultural

Office (Head of Extension Division), Agricultural Extension Officers, village government officials, as well as the chairperson and members of the *Mandiri Women Farmers' Group*.

In terms of program implementation, the empowerment initiative was carried out in a participatory manner, beginning with group formation facilitated by the village administration and relevant agencies, followed by technical guidance, extension services, and institutional strengthening provided by agricultural extension officers. Government support was generally delivered in the form of in-kind assistance (such as seeds, fertilizers, and agricultural tools) and training programs (e.g., agricultural field schools), rather than cash transfers, with priority given to groups that were active and had well-maintained administrative records.

The main constraints identified included low group cohesion, a weak sense of ownership among members, declining participation, limited facilities (such as meeting spaces and shared equipment), and the absence of sustainable operational funding. These factors collectively contributed to the discontinuation of routine group activities.

From the perspective of benefits, members reported tangible economic impacts, particularly improved access to fertilizers and seeds at more affordable prices through subsidies or group-based distribution, reduced production costs, and increased household income. Additionally, members experienced improvements in agricultural knowledge and technical skills through training and mentoring activities.

The proposed efforts to reactivate the group include renewed dissemination of information regarding the benefits of women farmers' groups, strengthening organizational structures and task allocation, ensuring consistent regular meetings, increasing the intensity of mentoring and extension materials, and providing more adequate operational funding support. From an internal perspective, reactivating member contributions is considered important to foster group self-reliance and reduce dependence on external assistance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the women's empowerment program implemented through women farmers' groups in Sangkunur Village has provided tangible benefits, including improvements in members' agricultural knowledge and skills, as well as contributions to household income. However, the sustainability of group activities has weakened due to declining member participation, limited financial resources, and insufficient collaboration with external stakeholders. Therefore, the program requires revitalization through continuous training and mentoring, accompanied by support from the government and community leaders, to enable the group to function effectively once again as a platform for women's empowerment.

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