

Gender Dynamics in Cooperative Governance: Insights from Women Led Social Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in the governance of social and economic organizations, including cooperatives, remains a significant issue that has not been thoroughly examined. This research aims to understand gender dynamics in the governance of women-led social cooperatives, as well as identify the contributions and challenges faced by women in decision-making positions. This study employs a qualitative approach with a multiple-case study design, focusing on eight women-based social cooperatives in three provinces of Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis, which were then analyzed using the NVivo 14 software-assisted thematic analysis method. The results indicate that cooperatives adopting participatory governance and transformational leadership models exhibit higher levels of sustainability and broader social impact. Solidarity among female members plays a crucial role in overcoming cultural barriers, despite traditional norms about gender remaining a persistent challenge. This research has implications for the importance of developing gender inclusion-based policies in cooperatives and strengthening women's leadership capacity. In addition, these findings contribute to the existing literature on the relationship between social innovation, participatory governance, and women's empowerment in the community economic sector.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender inequality in economic and social leadership remains a significant challenge globally. Although the movement towards gender equality continues to make progress, data from the World Economic Forum (2023) shows that only 22% of business leadership positions are held by women. In the context of the social economy, primarily cooperatives, women's representation in decision-making structures is also low, despite cooperatives often being seen as an inclusive and democratic model.

A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) revealed that women who lead social cooperatives tend to bring a more participatory and community-oriented managerial approach. In many countries, such as Spain and India, women-led cooperatives demonstrate higher levels of member participation and broader social impact compared to traditional cooperatives. However, they still face structural barriers such as cultural gender bias and limited access to financial resources.

In practice, gender dynamics in cooperative governance continue to exhibit a pattern of symbolic exclusion, where women's involvement is often limited to administrative or social activities. At the same time, strategic decisions remain dominated by men. This phenomenon raises a critical question: to what extent does women's leadership in cooperatives influence governance practices and social innovation? This research aims to provide a comprehensive answer to this question.

A number of previous studies have discussed women's contributions in social entrepreneurship and cooperatives, such as the research of Sarkki et al. (2024) which found that women-led social innovation initiatives are able to improve gender equality in rural communities. Another study by Costantini & Sebillio (2022) also revealed enabler and barrier factors in women's empowerment through social cooperatives, but this study has not focused on the internal dynamics of cooperative governance.

Although numerous studies have examined the role of women in the socio-economy, very few explicitly investigate gender interactions in cooperative governance structures, particularly those led by women in social-based cooperatives. This research fills the gap by investigating how gender dynamics are formed, maintained, or countered in daily cooperative management practices (Sarkki et al., 2021; Rosca et al., 2020).

The urgency of this research lies in the global momentum to mainstream gender in all aspects of economic development. By understanding the internal mechanisms in women's cooperatives, more effective policy interventions can be designed to strengthen gender inclusion at the community and microeconomic levels. This is in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5: Gender Equality.

The novelty of this research lies in its qualitative approach, which involves narrative analysis of gender dynamics in women's social cooperative councils, as well as the application of a governance lens to map power relations on a micro level. This differs from previous quantitative studies that only measured representation without exploring women's subjective experiences in decision-making.

This research aims to understand the dynamics of gender-based power in the governance of women-led social cooperatives, explore the challenges they face and the adaptation strategies they develop, and identify the specific contributions of women to innovations in more participatory and inclusive governance.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on gender and organizational governance, as well as a practical contribution to the development of a cooperative model based on gender inclusion. In addition, the results of this research will be helpful for policymakers and institutions promoting women's economic empowerment in designing programs that are more responsive to the needs of women actors in cooperatives.

The implications of this research are expected to encourage the reformulation of cooperative policies that integrate the principles of gender equality substantively, rather than merely procedurally. In addition, this research can be a reference in developing capacity building programs for women in cooperative leadership positions, strengthening a more equitable and sustainable socioeconomic ecosystem.

2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive-exploratory qualitative approach, utilizing multiple case study designs, to investigate gender dynamics in the governance of women-led social cooperatives. This approach was chosen because the nature of the phenomenon to be explored is subjective experience, power relations, and social dynamics in the specific context of cooperatives. The population in this study consists of women-based social cooperatives active in Indonesia, with a target population of cooperatives that have a formal governance structure. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, with the criteria that the cooperatives had been established for at least three years, had a majority of female management boards, and were actively involved in community social activities. From this population, 8 cooperatives in three different provinces were selected to represent the geographical variation and business sectors of the cooperative. Key informants in this study include cooperative chairmen, board members, and cooperative members who are active in organizational activities.

The primary instrument in this study is a semi-structured interview guide, developed based on governance theory, relational gender theory, and the findings of a literature review on women's social cooperatives. To maintain validity, a peer review of the list of questions was conducted by three experts in the field of gender and social economics, as well as a credibility test through member checking with some informants after the interview. The use of triangulation methods strengthened the reliability test, which included in-depth interviews, direct observation of cooperative meetings, and analysis of organizational documents such as articles of association, annual reports, and meeting minutes. The data collection technique was conducted in three stages: the initial exploration stage, primary data collection through interviews and field observations, and the data verification stage, which involved discussing the initial results with the relevant communities.

The collected data is analyzed using NVivo 14 software to facilitate the process of coding, categorization of themes, and mapping of relationship patterns in cooperative organizations. The analysis technique employed is thematic analysis, based on the model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), combined with narrative analysis to understand the personal storylines of women in cooperative leadership. The analysis

procedure begins with the data familiarization stage, followed by open coding, the development of parent themes and subthemes, the exploration of relationships between themes, and the preparation of a synthesis narrative that reflects gender dynamics in cooperative governance. This process is carried out iteratively to maintain the depth of analysis and the accuracy of interpretation of the reality constructed by the informants.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Data Presentation

This study analyzed 8 women-led social cooperatives in three provinces in Indonesia. Based on in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, five main themes regarding gender dynamics in cooperative governance were successfully identified. The graph above illustrates the frequency of themes identified in the data, where the factors of Female Member Solidarity and Decision-Making Participation were dominant, respectively, in almost all cooperatives.

The following is a detailed table of results:

Gender Dynamics Factors	Frequency Found (n=8 co-operatives)
Participation in decision-making	7
Traditional Role Sharing	6
Transformational Leadership	7
Socio-Cultural Barriers	5
Solidarity of Women Members	8

Research Data Analysis

Thematic analysis shows that women-led cooperatives tend to adopt participatory governance models. The decision making process involves broader consultation with members, compared to conventional cooperatives, which tend to be more hierarchical. Transformational leadership, which inspires change, empowerment, and collaboration, is strongly identified in women's cooperatives. However, traditional gender dynamics are still present, especially in the form of role divisions based on gender stereotypes. Administrative tasks are still often considered "women's territory", while asset and financial management often remain masculine even though female administrators dominate.

Research Data Interpretation

Data interpretation shows that solidarity among female members is the main strength in building inclusive cooperative governance. This solidarity allows women to support each other in facing cultural and social barriers that are still strong, such as the stigma that women are not suitable to be the main decision-makers. Nonetheless, limitations in accessing external resources and the dominance of patriarchal social norms remain significant challenges. Some cooperatives address this by building strategic partnerships with NGOs and government programs that support women's empowerment.

One of the important findings is that cooperatives that successfully create consultative spaces among members exhibit more stable and innovative organizational performance. The resulting decisions are more accommodating to the community's needs than those of cooperatives with a more authoritarian leadership pattern.

On the other hand, cooperatives that are still trapped in traditional role sharing show stagnation in product innovation and the development of external networks. This suggests that the changing gender paradigm in governance is a crucial factor in the sustainability of women's social cooperatives.

Discussion: Gender Dynamics in Cooperative Governance

Women's Participation in Decision-Making

This research shows that although formal structures of cooperatives recognize women's leadership, real participation in strategic decisions is not always evenly distributed. In cooperatives that adhere to a consultative pattern, female members feel more involved, empowered, and motivated.

In contrast, in some cooperatives, important decisions are still made by a handful of elites despite being labeled "women's cooperatives", creating an internal participation gap. This emphasizes the importance of building a deliberative culture to realize the principles of cooperative democracy in a substantive, not just procedural, manner.

Leadership Transformation in Women's Cooperatives

Women's leadership in social cooperatives is generally transformational, encouraging social change, and empowering communities. This leadership focuses on building a shared vision, motivating members, and championing the value of economic solidarity.

However, the double burden, as both a cooperative administrator and a household manager, remains a latent obstacle. Without structural support from family and community, the development of women's leadership potential is often hindered. This shows the need for community-based interventions to support women leaders in the cooperative sector.

Socio Cultural Barriers and Strategic Adaptation

Women's social cooperatives face socio-cultural barriers, including gender stereotypes, community resistance, and low trust in women's leadership. Some cooperatives address this by forming strategic alliances with external institutions to enhance their legitimacy.

Another adaptation strategy is to demonstrate collective success through the social and economic achievements of the cooperative. Real success is a powerful advocacy tool that helps build women's credibility as social leaders and innovators.

Women's Solidarity as Social Capital of Cooperatives

Solidarity between female members is a pillar of social cooperative resilience. The practice of mutual support, information sharing, mentoring between members, and emotional support strengthens the internal cohesion of the cooperative.

This solidarity not only increases the effectiveness of cooperative management but also creates a safe space for women to develop their leadership capacity without fear of being criticized or undermined by gender bias.

Practical Involvement

The practical implications of this study highlight the importance of building the capacity of cooperative organizations through programs that strengthen women's leadership, provide training on participatory governance, and create consultative spaces within cooperative structures. Additionally, public policy support is needed to strengthen women's cooperatives as part of community-based poverty alleviation strategies. At the community level, it is necessary to develop women's solidarity-based leadership mentoring programs to ensure a sustainable, inclusive, and transformative regeneration of cooperative women leaders.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the governance of women-led social cooperatives exhibits transformative patterns that reinforce the principles of participation, solidarity, and social innovation within these organizations. Women's transformational leadership and consultative models in decision-making have been proven to encourage more meaningful member engagement, strengthen organizational cohesion, and expand the social impact of cooperatives. However, socio-cultural barriers such as gender stereotypes and traditional role sharing are still challenges that must be faced with solidarity and external collaboration-based adaptation strategies. These findings underscore the importance of mainstreaming gender perspectives in the design of cooperative governance and in the development of social and economic policies. For further research, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study to observe changes in gender dynamics within women's cooperatives in line with the social transformation of the community, as well as to explore the impact of inclusive governance models on economic innovation at the community level.

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