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To cite this article: Xx Hernita, Iwan Perwira, Aldio Mukhlas Rizky & Zamrud Ichsan Rafi (10 Aug 2026): Gendered work and everyday organisational practices in an Indonesian women-led seaweed cooperative, *Development in Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/09614524.2026.2711252](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2026.2711252)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2026.2711252>



Published online: 10 Aug 2026.



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Gendered work and everyday organisational practices in an Indonesian women-led seaweed cooperative

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how gendered work and power are organised through everyday practices within a women led seaweed cooperative in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Drawing on feminist development, intersectionality, and practice-oriented perspectives, the study treats the cooperative as both a livelihood institution and an informal workplace where development is enacted through routine interaction. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations with cooperative members and related actors. The findings show that informal coordination enables flexibility while also shaping recognition, authority, and voice. Women's labour is positioned as adaptable and supportive, reinforcing blurred boundaries between productive and reproductive work. Differences among women reveal how age, seniority, kinship, and reputation create unequal access to information, recognition, and decision making. The study contributes to development scholarship by showing how women led collective organisations can reproduce gendered inequalities through everyday organisational practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 January 2026

Accepted 20 June 2026

KEYWORDS

Gender equality; cooperatives; organisational practices; coastal livelihoods; decent work and economic growth; Indonesia

Introduction

Seaweed aquaculture has become a central coastal livelihood across the Global South, often promoted for its contributions to household income, food systems, and climate adaptation in nearshore environments. In Indonesia, seaweed is also embedded in a wider political economy of rural development, export orientation, and value chain governance. Recent synthesis work highlights that seaweed value chains can expand livelihood opportunities for women, yet these benefits remain uneven and are shaped by local institutions, household relations, market access, and buyer expectations (Larson et al. 2021). In practice, women frequently perform substantial labour in planting preparation, drying, processing, and trading, while facing constrained control over income, decision making, and recognition as workers.

Existing scholarship has documented gendered divisions of labour across seaweed value chains and shown that formalisation and market upgrading can reconfigure who benefits from new opportunities (Anderson et al. 2023). In Indonesia, evidence similarly indicates that women are highly present in seaweed production and post-harvest activities, but their work is often positioned as supplementary or invisible within sector narratives and development interventions (Cuaton 2019). This invisibility forms part of a wider continuum in which women's labour is treated as flexible household support rather than skilled economic contribution (Prianto 2025). However, much of the literature remains oriented toward participation patterns, value chain mapping, or project level outcomes,

leaving limited understanding of how gendered inequalities are produced through everyday organisational practices inside local producer organisations. Specifically, there is limited qualitative attention to task allocation, recognition, informal authority, discipline, and decision making, even though these practices are central mechanisms through which gendered inequality can be reproduced inside cooperatives themselves.

This study addresses that gap through an in-depth qualitative case study of a women led seaweed cooperative in South Sulawesi, a major seaweed producing region where small scale producers are integrated into domestic and export-oriented chains. Prior research in South Sulawesi has documented village-level seaweed livelihood systems and the roles of intermediaries and local marketing arrangements in districts such as Takalar and Jeneponto, underscoring how local actors shape access to markets and livelihood security (Saleh et al. 2023). Rather than treating the cooperative only as a livelihood institution, this study approaches it as an informal workplace where labour, authority, recognition, and voice are shaped through everyday organisational practice. Building on this context, the present study focuses on one cooperative as a micro institutional site where gendered work, power, and agency are organised, contested, and normalised in everyday practice.

The study contributes to development scholarship in four ways. First, it reframes cooperative organisational life as a development arena in which gender, power, and social identities shape work, authority, and opportunity. Second, it provides empirical detail on how routine practices, rather than formal policies alone, structure women's inclusion, recognition, and agency. Third, it extends value chain and livelihoods discussions by showing how gendered inequalities are reproduced within collective organisations, not only through markets, households, or policy frameworks. Finally, it offers practice relevant insights for development actors supporting coastal livelihoods, suggesting that strengthening women's economic participation requires attention to everyday organisational processes that determine whose labour counts, whose authority is accepted, and whose voices are heard.

Literature review

Work, informality, and organisation as development practice

Development studies increasingly recognise that development is not only shaped by policies and programs but also produced through everyday practices within organisations and workplaces. Cooperatives, community enterprises, and small-scale producer groups are key sites where livelihoods are organised, resources allocated, and authority exercised. These settings are particularly significant in the Global South, where formal labour institutions are often weak and work is embedded within dense social relations (Barrientos 2019). Understanding organisational life as development practice shifts attention from abstract outcomes to the processes through which inclusion, exclusion, and opportunity are negotiated in daily work.

From this perspective, organisations are not neutral intermediaries but active development actors whose routines and norms shape social and economic trajectories. Decisions about who works, who leads, and whose labour is valued are often made through informal interactions rather than formal procedures. Informality therefore does not indicate disorder. Rather, it reflects alternative systems of regulation grounded in shared norms, expectations, and moral reasoning (Grant 2024). In cooperatives and small enterprises, formal rules often coexist with informal practices that guide work allocation, leadership, discipline, and recognition (Diakit   et al. 2022). Analysing organisational practice therefore provides insight into how development ideals are translated, reshaped, or constrained in specific contexts (Easter, Ceulemans, and Kelly 2021).

Gendered labour and social reproduction

Feminist development theory highlights that labour is deeply gendered and inseparable from processes of social reproduction (Rao 2021). Women's work in agriculture and coastal livelihoods is

frequently characterised by flexibility, informality, and low recognition, reflecting broader gender norms that position women as secondary earners or caregivers rather than primary economic actors (Ghosh 2021). Such framing often blurs the boundary between productive and reproductive labour, allowing women's contributions to be taken for granted within both households and organisations.

Within cooperative and community-based settings, these assumptions can shape task allocation, authority, and expectations of commitment. Even when organisations are women led, gendered norms may continue to influence whose work is considered skilled, whose time is treated as elastic, and whose leadership is deemed legitimate (El Badriati et al. 2022). Feminist scholars therefore caution against assuming that collective or participatory organisational forms automatically produce gender equality. Instead, attention is needed to how gendered power relations are reproduced through everyday practices (Cornwall 2018).

Intersectionality and power in gendered organisational life

Intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding how gender interacts with other social positions to shape differentiated experiences of work. Rather than treating women as a uniform group, intersectional analysis draws attention to how age, marital status, kinship ties, educational background, and organisational seniority intersect with gender to structure access to resources, authority, and recognition (Alghamdi 2024; Thatcher, Hymer, and Arwine 2023). In small scale organisations, these distinctions may be subtle yet consequential, influencing who speaks in meetings, who is trusted with responsibility, and who bears the heaviest workloads.

Power further clarifies how these differences operate within women-led cooperatives. Feminist development scholarship shows that power is not limited to formal authority, but also operates through social norms, recognition, confidence, collective action, and control over resources (Kabeer 1994; VeneKlasen and Miller 2002). In this study, power is understood through three inter-related dimensions. Power over refers to relational forms of control or influence through which certain actors shape others' access to tasks, information, recognition, and decision making (Allen 1998; Yoder and Kahn 1992). Power with refers to collective capacity, solidarity, and mutual support that allow women to sustain cooperative work. Power within refers to women's confidence, practical judgement, and sense of legitimate agency in navigating organisational expectations.

This framework is useful because power in small scale producer organisations is often subtle rather than openly coercive. Authority may be expressed through advice, reputation, age, experience, kinship, or moral expectations rather than direct command. Analysing intersectionality and power together therefore helps explain how women-led cooperatives can create spaces for participation while still reproducing internal hierarchies among women.

Agency and everyday negotiation

Agency in organisational settings is increasingly conceptualised as relational and context-dependent rather than overtly oppositional (Yolles and Rautakivi 2024). Workers navigate constraints through negotiation, accommodation, and selective compliance, balancing personal needs with collective expectations. Feminist and labour scholars caution against equating agency solely with resistance or empowerment, noting that coping strategies may simultaneously sustain and subtly reshape existing arrangements (Galleli and Amaral 2026).

This understanding of agency is particularly relevant in cooperative settings, where collective norms and moral obligations shape acceptable forms of action. Women may exercise agency through small adjustments to routines, strategic silences, quiet negotiation, or appeals to shared values rather than explicit challenge (Saffutra et al. 2025). Attending to these everyday forms of negotiation allows for a nuanced analysis that recognises women's capacities to act while remaining

attentive to structural constraints. Such an approach avoids romanticising agency while acknowledging its presence within unequal organisational contexts (Tijani 2024).

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine gendered work and everyday organisational practices within a women led seaweed cooperative. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand meanings, norms, relationships, and informal practices that shape organisational life. The case study design enabled close attention to one organisational setting and allowed the analysis to capture context, process, and lived experience.

The research was conducted in a coastal village in Takalar Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. South Sulawesi is one of Indonesia's major seaweeds producing regions and is integrated into domestic and export-oriented seaweed value chains. Takalar was selected because seaweed production and post-harvest processing form an important livelihood base for coastal households, and women are actively involved in cooperative-based processing activities.

The cooperative was purposively selected for three reasons. First, it is formally registered but operates largely through informal organisational practices. Second, women occupy most membership and leadership positions, making it suitable for examining gendered organisational dynamics. Third, the cooperative functions as a key livelihood institution in a setting where formal labour protection and social security are limited. These characteristics made the site relevant for analysing everyday organisational practices as development practice.

Data were collected between May and August 2025. Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture diverse roles, responsibilities, and experiences. The aim was not statistical representativeness, but analytical depth and variation. A total of 22 informants participated in the study (Table 1).

Primary data were collected through semi structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or local dialects, depending on informant preference, and lasted between 45 and 90 min. The interview guide focused on everyday work practices, task allocation, decision making, informal leadership, perceptions of fairness, and experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

Participant observation was conducted during routine cooperative activities, including seaweed drying, processing, meetings, and informal interactions. Field notes documented organisational routines, gendered interactions, work arrangements, and unspoken norms shaping authority and recognition. Informal conversations before and after cooperative activities were used to clarify observations and deepen contextual understanding.

Data analysis followed an iterative reflexive thematic approach. Interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were typed and integrated with interview transcripts. Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to build familiarity and identify preliminary patterns related to work organisation, gender roles, and everyday practices. Second, open coding was conducted manually to capture recurring actions,

Table 1. Informant profile.

Informant code	Role in cooperative
I01 to I03	Cooperative chairperson and management committee
I04 to I06	Senior women members with long-term membership
I07 to I12	Active women members involved in processing and drying
I13 to I15	Casual women workers engaged seasonally
I16 to I18	Men involved in logistics and marketing
I19 to I20	Local intermediary or buyer linked to the cooperative
I21 to I22	Village-level actors familiar with cooperative activities

meanings, and expressions in participants' accounts. Third, related codes were grouped into broader analytical categories, including task allocation, recognition, informal leadership, authority, kinship, and negotiation. Attention was given to differences across age, length of membership, marital status, and kinship ties. Fourth, these categories were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of gendered labour, intersectionality, informality, power, and agency.

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, observations, and informal conversations, as well as by including contrasting perspectives within the cooperative. Reflexive memos were maintained to document analytical decisions and the researcher's positionality.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. Verbal informed consent was obtained before data collection, in line with local ethical norms and literacy considerations. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms and informant codes are used, and identifying details have been removed from the analysis. Given the small scale and close social relations within the cooperative, findings are presented in aggregate terms to minimise potential harm.

Results and discussion

Organising work in practice

Work within the cooperative is organised through everyday decisions and informal coordination rather than through fixed job descriptions or written schedules. Members described daily activities such as drying, sorting, and packaging seaweed as fluid and responsive to changing conditions, including weather, household obligations, and market demand. Tasks are adjusted on a day-to-day basis through verbal communication among members and guidance from senior figures, reflecting a shared understanding of flexibility as necessary for sustaining participation.

Several informants explained that work allocation is based primarily on availability and perceived reliability rather than formal role assignment. One senior member noted that tasks are often decided each morning depending on who is present and able to work. As she explained, "We do not have a fixed division like this person must do this. We see who comes early, who has time that day, and then we arrange it together" (I05). This approach allows the cooperative to adapt to fluctuating labour availability while accommodating members' domestic responsibilities.

Despite this apparent flexibility, informants also highlighted that decisions about task allocation are not entirely spontaneous. Longstanding members and those considered more experienced often play a key role in coordinating activities, even when they do not hold formal leadership positions. A processing worker described how instructions are typically given indirectly through trusted figures, stating, "Usually we follow what the senior women say. They already know which work needs to be done first" (I09). Such practices indicate that informal authority structures shape how work is organised in practice.

Time discipline within the cooperative is similarly informal. Attendance is not strictly monitored, and lateness is generally tolerated, particularly when linked to childcare or household duties. However, informants noted that repeated absence or perceived lack of commitment can affect access to preferred tasks. One seasonal worker explained, "If you often come late or miss work without telling anyone, later you might not be asked first when there is work" (I14). This suggests that flexibility operates within implicit boundaries shaped by shared expectations of responsibility.

Collectively, these accounts illustrate that organising work in the cooperative relies on a combination of adaptability, informal coordination, and social judgment. While the absence of rigid rules enables participation for women managing multiple responsibilities, it also creates space for informal criteria to influence who is prioritised and trusted. These everyday practices form the foundation through which work, opportunity, and obligation are negotiated within the cooperative.

Gendered patterns of labour and responsibility

Labour within the cooperative is structured through gendered expectations that shape both the types of tasks performed and the responsibilities attached to them. Women members are primarily engaged in activities such as drying, sorting, cleaning, and packaging seaweed, which are widely described as requiring patience, careful handling, and attention to detail. These tasks are understood as compatible with women's domestic roles and are often performed alongside childcare and household work. As one member explained, "This work suits women because we can stop when the children need us and then continue again later" (I11). Such descriptions frame women's labour as inherently flexible and adaptable, reinforcing its alignment with reproductive responsibilities.

Men's involvement in the cooperative, by contrast, is largely concentrated in activities related to transportation, loading, and market transactions. These tasks are associated with physical strength and mobility and are often described as requiring engagement beyond the village. A man involved in logistics noted, "Usually the women handle the drying and sorting. The men deal with bringing the seaweed to buyers or moving heavy loads" (I17). This division of labour is rarely formalised but is widely accepted as appropriate, reflecting shared assumptions about gendered capabilities and roles.

Women members frequently described their work as essential yet understated. Although processing activities are central to meeting quality standards and securing buyers, informants noted that this labour is often treated as routine rather than skilled. One experienced worker observed, "If the drying is not done properly, the seaweed will be rejected. But people say it is simple work, even though it needs experience" (I08). This perception contributes to the limited recognition of women's expertise, despite its importance to the cooperative's functioning.

Responsibility within the cooperative is also gendered in subtle ways. Women are often expected to maintain harmony, assist others, and absorb disruptions when work schedules change. Several informants noted that when unexpected tasks arise, women tend to adjust their time or workload without formal discussion. As one member reflected, "If there is extra work, usually the women just help. We do not really talk about who should do more" (I12). This expectation of accommodation reinforces unequal distributions of effort, even within a collective setting.

At the same time, women's acceptance of these responsibilities is not always uncritical. Some informants expressed ambivalence about the taken-for-granted nature of their labour, particularly when compared to tasks associated with market transactions or income. A senior member remarked, "People see selling as more important, but without our work, there is nothing to sell" (I06). These reflections point to underlying tensions between the centrality of women's labour and its limited visibility, highlighting how gendered responsibilities are normalised yet occasionally questioned in everyday cooperative life.

Authority, recognition, and informal leadership

Authority within the cooperative is exercised through everyday interactions rather than through formal organisational positions alone. Although the cooperative has an official management structure, many informants described decision making as guided by a small number of experienced members whose influence derives from seniority, long-term involvement, and personal reputation. These individuals are often consulted informally and play a central role in coordinating activities, resolving disagreements, and setting priorities. As one member noted, "Even if there is a chairperson, we usually wait to hear what the older women think first" (I04).

Recognition within the cooperative is closely tied to visibility and perceived contribution, yet not all forms of labour are recognised equally. Tasks associated with coordination, dealing with buyers, or representing the cooperative externally tend to be more visible and are often linked to leadership roles. In contrast, routine processing work, predominantly performed by women, is frequently described as background activity. One informant reflected on this imbalance, stating, "People

remember who goes to meetings or meets the buyers. They forget who spends hours drying and sorting" (I10). This differentiation shapes how authority and contribution are valued in practice.

Informal leadership often emerges through acts of guidance rather than explicit instruction. Senior women commonly direct work by demonstrating preferred methods or quietly correcting mistakes, rather than issuing orders. A processing worker described this style of leadership as indirect but influential, explaining, "They do not tell us what to do directly. They show us, and we understand" (I07). Such practices reinforce hierarchies while maintaining an appearance of collective equality.

Access to recognition is also shaped by social proximity to cooperative leaders. Members with close kinship ties or long-standing relationships with management are more likely to be entrusted with responsibilities or consulted during decision making. A newer member observed, "If you are still new, you mostly listen. Only after some time do people ask your opinion" (I13). This gradual accumulation of voice illustrates how authority is earned through time and social integration rather than formal criteria.

Despite these hierarchies, informants rarely described authority as coercive. Instead, leadership is framed as responsibility and service to the group. Several members emphasised that leaders are expected to prioritise collective interests and maintain harmony. As one committee member explained, "If you are seen as pushing your own interest, people will not respect you" (I02). This expectation constrains overt exercises of power while sustaining informal influence.

Together, these accounts show that authority and recognition in the cooperative are embedded in social relations and everyday practice. Informal leadership structures shape whose labour is visible and whose voice matters, while remaining largely unquestioned due to their alignment with shared norms of respect and collectivity. These dynamics reveal how power operates subtly within cooperative settings, shaping organisational life without explicit hierarchy.

Differentiated experiences among women

Although women constitute the majority of the cooperative's workforce, their experiences of work, inclusion, and recognition are not uniform. Informants described important differences based on age, marital status, length of membership, and kinship ties, which shape access to preferred tasks, flexibility, information, and voice. These differences are rarely formalised, but they are widely understood by members. As one woman explained, "We are all women here, but our situations are not the same" (I08).

Age and seniority play a significant role in structuring everyday participation. Older women and long-standing members often have greater autonomy in managing time, selecting tasks, and influencing work arrangements. Their authority is not always formal, but it is recognised through experience, familiarity, and moral standing. Younger and newer members, by contrast, tend to participate first through labour rather than voice. They are expected to observe, listen, and demonstrate commitment before their opinions are actively sought. As one younger worker noted, "At first, you just follow what you are told. Later, when people know you, it becomes easier" (I14).

Marital status and caregiving responsibilities also shape women's organisational experiences. Married women with young children often rely on informal flexibility, but this flexibility is unevenly experienced. Some felt supported when adjusting work hours, while others worried that repeated requests could weaken their reputation for commitment. One member shared, "If you often ask for permission because of family matters, people understand, but you also feel you should not ask too much" (I11).

Kinship ties further differentiate access to information and informal protection. Women related to cooperative leaders or senior members often learn about work opportunities, schedule changes, or buyer-related issues earlier than others. These ties do not always operate as explicit favouritism, but they create unequal proximity to decision making. A newer member without such connections remarked, "Those who have family inside know things earlier. For us, we just wait to be told" (I15).

Access to voice is therefore unevenly distributed. Senior women may express disagreement indirectly through advice, humour, or reminders of collective responsibility, whereas younger or newer women are more likely to remain silent or raise concerns privately. Silence should not be read simply as passivity. In this context, it can function as a strategy for avoiding conflict, protecting one's reputation, and maintaining access to future work. However, silence also carries a cost because it limits the visibility of dissatisfaction and allows unequal arrangements to continue without open challenge.

These dynamics show that collective participation does not eliminate intragender hierarchy. Women share a strong sense of belonging, yet authority and voice remain shaped by seniority, age, kinship proximity, reputation, and access to information. As one senior woman observed, "We work together, but everyone knows who is closer to the leaders and who is not" (I06).

Negotiation, adaptation, and everyday agency

Women's participation in the cooperative is shaped not only by organisational norms and constraints, but also by ongoing negotiation and adaptation in everyday practice. Informants described various ways in which they adjust work routines, redistribute effort, and manage expectations in order to balance cooperative responsibilities with household obligations. These adjustments are usually informal and negotiated quietly rather than openly discussed. As one member explained, "If I cannot come early, I tell a friend and we change tasks among ourselves" (I12). Such practices show that agency is exercised through coordination, mutual accommodation, and practical adjustment rather than direct confrontation.

Adaptation is especially visible in how women manage time and workload during periods of increased domestic demand or seasonal pressure. Several informants described choosing tasks that allowed them to remain close to home, pause work temporarily, or return later when household needs had been addressed. A processing worker noted, "When my children are sick, I choose work that I can leave and return to. Everyone understands, as long as the work is finished" (I09). This flexibility enables continued participation, but it also reinforces the expectation that women will self-manage competing responsibilities without disrupting cooperative routines.

Negotiation also occurs in relation to workload and recognition. While women rarely challenge task assignments directly, some described subtle ways of expressing limits, such as slowing the pace of work, delaying acceptance of additional tasks, or declining indirectly. One informant reflected, "You cannot say no directly, but you can show that you are already tired" (I07). These embodied and indirect strategies allow women to assert boundaries while preserving social harmony.

The preference for quiet negotiation reflects the risks attached to open confrontation. Several informants suggested that direct disagreement could be interpreted as disrespectful, especially when directed toward senior members or those with close ties to cooperative leaders. Open confrontation may affect reputation, reduce trust, or limit access to future work opportunities. For this reason, women often use private conversations, humour, delay, silence, or appeals to collective responsibility to express dissatisfaction without openly challenging authority. Non-confrontational agency is therefore not simply a preference for harmony, but a practical strategy for managing risk within a socially embedded organisation.

At times, women draw on collective values to legitimise their actions. Appeals to fairness, mutual support, or the cooperative's long-term sustainability are used to justify adjustments or requests. A senior member explained, "If we remind each other that this is for all of us, then it is easier to agree on changes" (I05). Such framing situates individual needs within collective responsibility, enabling negotiation without overt conflict.

These everyday practices demonstrate that agency within the cooperative is neither passive nor openly transformative. It is exercised through negotiation, adaptation, and selective compliance with organisational norms. These forms of agency allow women to sustain participation under

constrained conditions, but they may also reinforce arrangements that discourage open disagreement. Gendered organisational life is therefore actively navigated through cautious and relational forms of agency.

Discussion

This study examined gendered work and everyday organisational practices within a women led seaweed cooperative, treating organisational life as a site where development is enacted in practice. The findings show that development outcomes emerge not only through formal cooperative structures or stated empowerment goals, but also through routine practices that organise labour, authority, recognition, and responsibility. Interpreted through the theoretical foundations outlined earlier, the analysis underscores the importance of examining work as socially embedded practice rather than as a neutral economic activity.

First, the organisation of work through informal coordination reinforces insights from practice-oriented development scholarship, which emphasises how organisational routines, rather than formal rules alone, shape inclusion and exclusion. As argued by Taylor et al. (2023), development practices often operate through tacit norms and negotiated arrangements that are not captured in official representations. In the cooperative studied here, flexibility and informality enable participation for women managing multiple responsibilities, but they also create space for social judgement to influence access to opportunity. This supports the view that informality is not the absence of regulation, but a form of structured governance grounded in social relations (Fawaz 2023).

Second, the findings resonate with feminist development literature on gendered labour and social reproduction. Women's work is organised in ways that align with normative expectations of flexibility, care, and patience, reinforcing blurred boundaries between productive and reproductive labour. As Maybom and Funder (2025) note, such framing often leads to women's labour being undervalued even when it is central to livelihood sustainability. The cooperative context does not automatically disrupt these dynamics. Instead, it demonstrates how collective organisational forms can reproduce gendered assumptions through everyday practice, echoing Cornwall (2018) critique of overly optimistic narratives of women's empowerment.

Third, the differentiated experiences observed among women highlight the analytical value of intersectionality in organisational research. The findings complicate any assumption that women led, or women dominated organisations are internally egalitarian. Instead, they show how age, seniority, marital status, and kinship interact with gender to shape voice, recognition, and access to flexibility. This aligns with intersectional scholarship that emphasises relational and situational inequalities rather than fixed categories of disadvantage (Bambra 2022; Dy and MacNeil 2023). By situating intersectionality within everyday organisational practice, the study extends its application beyond policy analysis into the micro dynamics of work.

These findings deepen the analysis of intra gender hierarchy within women-led cooperatives. Women's shared gender identity does not produce uniform power, equal voice, or equal access to recognition. Instead, seniority, age, kinship proximity, and reputation create differentiated positions among women. Older and long-standing members often hold informal power over task allocation, information flows, and acceptable forms of speech, while newer and less connected members participate more through labour than decision making. At the same time, cooperative life also depends on power with, as women sustain work through mutual support, shared responsibility, and everyday accommodation. This tension between hierarchy and solidarity is central to understanding how gendered organisational life is reproduced in practice.

Fourth, patterns of authority and recognition within the cooperative illustrate how power operates through legitimacy rather than formal hierarchy. Informal leadership grounded in experience and social standing reflects what Barrientos (2019) describes as the social embeddedness of

labour governance in Global South contexts. Authority is exercised subtly, often framed as service, responsibility, or moral obligation, which limits overt contestation while sustaining unequal visibility of different forms of labour. This finding reinforces the importance of examining how recognition is distributed in practice, particularly in settings where collective identity may obscure internal hierarchies.

Finally, women's negotiation and adaptation strategies invite a nuanced understanding of agency that avoids binary framings of empowerment versus oppression. Consistent with feminist and labour scholarship, agency here is relational and constrained, expressed through accommodation, quiet negotiation, and selective compliance rather than overt resistance (Wettermark and Berglund 2025). These practices enable women to sustain participation and manage competing demands, but they do not necessarily challenge the organisational arrangements that produce inequality. Non-confrontational agency therefore carries a double meaning. It allows women to protect relationships and remain included, yet it may also reinforce norms that discourage open disagreement. Recognising these forms of agency is important for development analysis because it avoids romanticising coping strategies while acknowledging women's active engagement with organisational life.

Conclusion

This study examined gendered work and everyday organisational practices within a women led seaweed cooperative in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The findings show that the cooperative operates not only as a livelihood institution, but also as an informal workplace where labour, authority, recognition, and voice are shaped through routine practice. Informal coordination enables flexibility for women managing multiple responsibilities, yet it also allows social judgement, seniority, and kinship proximity to influence access to opportunity and recognition.

The study contributes to development scholarship by showing how gendered inequalities are reproduced and negotiated within cooperatives, not only through markets, households, or policy frameworks. Women's shared participation does not produce equal power or equal voice. Instead, age, seniority, kinship, and reputation create differentiated positions among women, while agency is often expressed through quiet negotiation and adaptation rather than open challenge. These findings caution against assuming that women led collective organisations are automatically egalitarian.

For development practice, the study suggests that strengthening women's economic participation requires attention to everyday organisational processes, especially task allocation, recognition, informal authority, voice, and workload distribution. The study is limited by its focus on a single cooperative and a defined period of fieldwork. Future research could compare multiple cooperatives or examine how gendered organisational practices change in response to market shifts, climate variability, or external development interventions.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Xx Hernita:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Iwan Perwira:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Aldio Mukhlis Rizky:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Zamrud Ichsan Rafi:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The qualitative data generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and the need to protect the confidentiality of participants in a small-scale community setting. Anonymised excerpts of data may be made available by the author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval and agreement on data use.

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