



THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM MANAGEMENT IN WAKATOBI REGENCY TO ACHIEVE SDGS GOAL 5 ON GENDER EQUALITY

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Abstract

Women in ecotourism play a key role as capital to achieve sustainable development. This study aims to determine the role of Bajo Mola women in the development of sustainable ecotourism in Wakatobi Regency to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, namely gender equality. This study uses a qualitative approach, data collection through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Informants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling method consisting of women, government, community, traditional and religious leaders. Data analysis techniques include data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study indicate that in general there are three roles carried out by women to support the development of sustainable ecotourism, namely: (1) the role of Bajo women in supervision and management, namely by participating in supporting the utilization of marine potential that prioritizes sustainability. (2) the role of Bajo women in improving the economy as tour guides, developing seafood-based culinary, and producing handicrafts from marine potential, as well as actively marketing marine products to local markets and to various regions. (3) The role of education and teaching, namely Bajo women as guardians of local values for each generation through tourism activities that are rich in cultural values and environmental conservation. While they still require ongoing support from various parties, this study confirms that Bajo women hold a strategic position in realizing inclusive and sustainable ecotourism, which is crucial for achieving SDG 5, particularly target 5.1, which addresses gender equality in employment and economic benefits.

Keywords: Role of Women; ecotourism management; Community-based ecotourism; SDGs Goal 5; Gender Equality.

A. Introduction

International pressure to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has guided Indonesia in its implementation, namely by upholding the principles of the SDGs: (a) universal development principles, (b) integration, (c) no one left behind, and (d) inclusive principles [1]. In this sustainable development, the principles of participation and gender equality can be realized through community empowerment activities, including increasing the role of women in various development activities, including ecotourism development. Ecotourism practices are not merely business travel packages but also natural and cultural attractions that prioritize environmental education and improve the local economy (Rahman et al., 2022). The concept of ecotourism has the following main characteristics: (a) nature-based ecotourism, (b) experiences centered on learning and education, and (c) ecotourism projects must prioritize environmental and social sustainability based on nature (Hijriati & Mardiana, 2015; Tran & Walter, 2014; Marlina et al. 2023; Walter & Sen 2018). Ecotourism is defined as tourism that prioritizes sustainability and seeks to achieve environmental economic value (Purnomo, 2020; Darmawan et al. 2018). Ecotourism products generally offer the natural and cultural potential of the community, as they are considered economically valuable for the tourism trade (Sukmawan et al. 2021).

The success of ecotourism can be assessed through community-based management, including the role of women in its implementation. However, the gap in employment opportunities between men and women remains an unresolved gender equality issue. Data from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2017 revealed that Indonesia's gender equality index remains relatively low, ranking 105th out of 188 countries. From a gender perspective, the proportion of women and men in the informal sector is 40% women and 60% men. This proportion of women in the informal sector accounts for 70% of the total female workforce (Susanty, 2020). Gender equality issues are often related to low wages for women workers, sexual violence, exploitation, unequal distribution of household chores, and discrimination in public decision-making, all of which hinder the development of gender equality. While the tourism sector is one of the employment sectors that requires women as its workforce, women still struggle to actualize themselves in social, national, and state life (Nutsugbodo & Mensah, 2020).

One study noted that women are trying to introduce traditional culinary traditions in tourism promotion (Syahadat, 2022). However, in practice, it has not significantly contributed to improving the welfare and income of working women (Tam, 2019). Notes on the role of women in ecotourism in Wakatobi Regency specifically cannot be demonstrated. The current phenomenon in Wakatobi appears to be still weak in the information and knowledge gathering stage, which is because the focus is still limited to maritime-based tourist attractions only. The role of indigenous women (Wowine) who work in tourism sectors has not been well recorded, so to support this research, a re-examination of women's involvement in the tourism industry and their contribution to increasing family income and environmental education is necessary. Meanwhile, some literature mentions that indigenous women (Wowine) of Wakatobi have unique and interesting cultural adaptations to explore. The title Wowine Wakatobi as women who uphold customs and actively play a role in development while maintaining their nature as Women are the reason why ecofeminist studies are urgently needed. Wakatobi Regency is about to mark more than two decades since its establishment. Over the past 23 years, Wakatobi Regency has been vigorously promoting its tourism industry.

It is not surprising that with the wealth of marine and socio-cultural potential that it possesses, Wakatobi has 2 spatial statuses, namely as a marine conservation area in the world's coral triangle and as a national tourism area touted as one of Indonesia's ten new Balis (Marlina, 2022). The urgency of this research lies in the fact that since its inception, Wakatobi Regency has strived to fully implement ecotourism practices possible, even though community participation, including the role of women, in tourism is still suboptimal. Meanwhile, sustainable ecotourism is beginning to provide balanced attention to natural, social, and cultural resources. Women's roles in tourism development are often limited due to gender status and inherent customs. Women are still considered the weaker sex, best left at home to care for their families. Meanwhile, all members of society are expected to play an active role in environmental matters, including women.

The role of women in ecotourism is an interesting study, considering their role in contributing to tourism development amidst the limitations of living with several binding socio-cultural rules. Women's role is crucial given their role as the first school for children and future generations. Women are the first teachers, able to provide environmental

education and teaching to the community. In domestic life, women are accustomed to carrying out dual roles, which significantly contribute to the successful implementation of ecotourism in accordance with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. This study aims to determine the role of women in ecotourism, encompassing three aspects: (1) education, teaching, and culture, (2) environmental conservation, and (3) women's role in tourism economic activities in Wakatobi Regency.

The role of Bajo women working in tourism sectors has not been well documented, therefore, to support this research, a re-examination of partnerships and women's involvement in the tourism industry is necessary. While some literature indicates that Bajo women have unique and interesting cultural adaptations worth exploring, the reality of Wakatobi Regency's tourism development, which has so far focused on its natural resources, presents a challenge in uncovering how human resources play an inseparable role (Dilwan & Astina 2019; Nelson et al. 2021).

Research indicates that with approximately 100,000 people living within the national park, the Wakatobi community is among those least likely to participate in marine governance in Wakatobi due to their minority status. In the Wakatobi community's understanding, the outside world is strongly influenced by harmony within the family. In recent cases, Wakatobi women have even excelled in the business world, dominating almost several markets and acting directly as buyers of goods in Makassar, Surabaya, and Jakarta (Udu S, 2019). Buton's history records women's involvement in the Buton kingdom's governance system, placing them in strategic positions, with the first Buton king being Queen Wakaa-kaa and the second being Queen Bulawambona (Zaenu, 1985). Studies on women in ecotourism development are rare, particularly in their role as first teachers of environmental education for children and future generations in the community.

B. Methodology

1. Research Design

Qualitative research is an approach used to study objects in their natural context, without involving experiments, where the researcher acts as the primary instrument. The data collection technique in this study was triangulation, which is the combination of various methods. Data analysis was conducted inductively, and the results of qualitative research tend to emphasize understanding meaning rather than generalizations (Sugiyono, 2011). This study employed a qualitative approach with an ethnographic approach. This ethnographic approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the culture and lifestyle of a community. In this case, the focus of the research is on Bajo Mola women, allowing researchers to explore in more depth the cultural, social, and economic aspects that influence their role in sustainable ecotourism. This research will be conducted from January to November 2025. The research location is Mola Village, South Wangi-Wangi District, Wakatobi Regency. The subjects or respondents for this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on certain considerations and criteria: Bajo women, traditional leaders, community leaders, and the Wakatobi government.

2. Instruments

In this study, the researcher serves as a key instrument in data collection. Through in-depth interviews, this study hopes to obtain information that can answer the research questions. The researcher interacts with the subjects to obtain true meaning. The researcher's presence at the research site serves as a data collection instrument, interacting directly with the subjects. In an ethnographic approach, the researcher presents the research results as an impartial third person and reports on what they heard and observed from the participants. At this stage of the research, to obtain valid and accountable data, the researcher conducts the following: Data collection techniques are methods used by the researcher to understand the problems related to the conditions and needs of the research. In this study, the researcher will employ three data collection techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation.

- a. In-depth Interviews. In this study, the interviews are unstructured. However, to ensure the interviews align with the research focus, the researcher will use an interview guide. This technique allows the researcher to explore information openly and in-depth, thus gaining a more comprehensive insight into the phenomenon being studied.
- b. Participant Observation: Researchers will be directly involved in the daily activities of the Bajo Mola community, particularly women. Participant observation aims to observe and record information related to the role of Bajo women in ecotourism and the partnerships established in ecotourism management.

- c. Documentation: Documentation techniques in this research will involve collecting data in the form of writing, images, or recordings that can enrich the research findings. Data obtained from observations and interviews will be more credible if supported by visual evidence, such as photographs or academic and artistic works relevant to the research context. This documentation serves to strengthen the research findings and provide a more complete picture of the subject under study.

3. Technique of Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted to obtain answers to the questions outlined in the research focus. In-depth data analysis in this study used an interactive data analysis model. There are three main components in qualitative research data analysis: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. After data collection, the researcher's next steps were data reduction, data presentation, drawing preliminary conclusions, and conducting verification. A validation check of the findings was conducted to obtain valid data. Data validation is one way to address concerns about data validity in qualitative research. This research was conducted in three stages, consisting of ten steps in total. These three stages are: (1) preparation before the research; (2) conducting the research in the field; and (3) writing a report after conducting the research.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Findings

- a. *The physical, social and economic environmental conditions of the Bajo Mola community in Wakatobi Regency*

The Bajo Mola area is several villages in the South Wangi-Wangi District, Wakatobi Regency, which is one of the regencies in Southeast Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. Bajo Mola Village is the name for five (5) villages in Bajo. The Bajo Mola community settlement in Wakatobi Regency is administratively divided into 5 villages, namely Mola Nelayan Bakti Village, South Mola Village, Mola Samaturu Village, North Mola Village and Mola Bahari Village. The five villages are better known as Mola Village or Bajo Village, which are 5 villages in the South Wangi-Wangi District area. The geographical condition of Mola Village is a coastal area with an area of $\pm 8.3 \text{ km}^2$, the village boundaries are as follows: (1) North Bordering the sea, (2) East Bordering Mandati III Village, (3) South Bordering the sea and (4) West Bordering the Otowwe Island Strait. The following is a map of the Bajo Mola Research location.

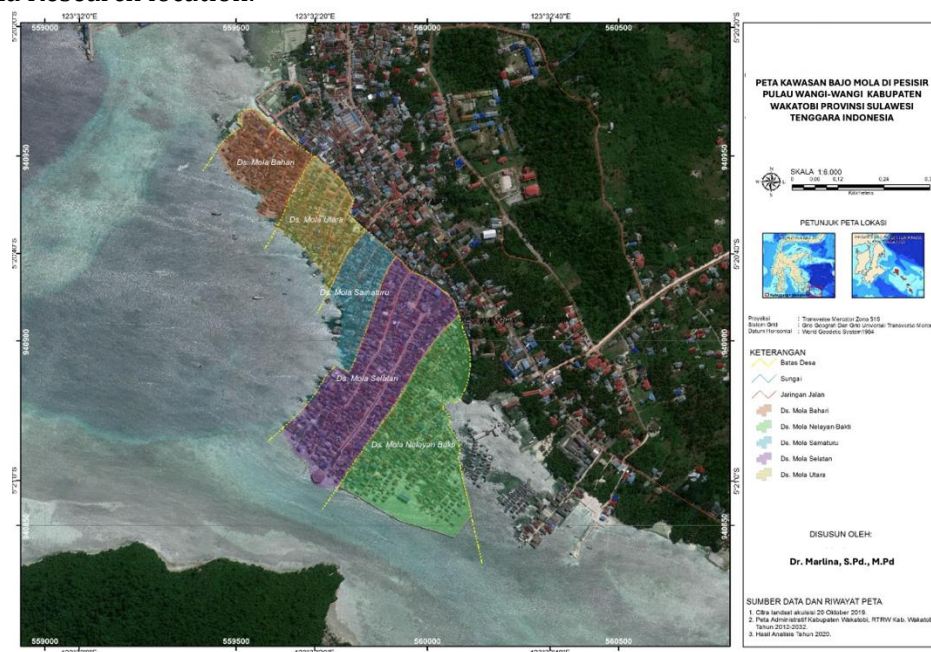


Figure 1. Map of the Research Location of Bajo Mola Village

Physically, Bajo Mola Village is a village built on the sea, a tidal area in the northern part of Bajo Mola that has been reclaimed by the community. This area, located on the Mandati coast, is the result of reclamation. Due to its reclamation, Mola Village has a relatively flat topography, approximately 1-2 meters above sea level (between 0% and 5%). The climate of Mola Village is influenced by the dry and rainy seasons, with daily temperatures ranging from 19-34°C.

The geography of the Bajo settlement area is strongly influenced by the Flores and Banda Seas. During the west monsoon, Bajo Mola experiences large waves, while during the east monsoon, the ocean currents are relatively calm. The Mola area is home to several important

ecosystems, including seagrass and coral reefs, which harbor a variety of marine life such as rabbitfish, crabs, sea cucumbers, shellfish, and other small fish. Population and Socio-Cultural Structure: Most of the population is fishermen. The population distribution is as follows:

Table 1. Population per village in the Bajo settlement area in 2024

No	Village	Population by gender		Total Population
		Male	Female	
1	Mola Selatan	930	952	1.882
2	Mola Utara	493	502	955
3	Mola Samaturu	598	483	1.081
4	Mola Bahari	636	655	1.291
5	Mola Nelayan Bakti	1.271	1.378	2.649
	Total	3.928	3.970	7.858

Source: Profile of 5 Bajo Mola Community Villages, 2024

Mola Village, in line with its potential as a maritime and fisheries-based village, strives to advance its livelihoods by improving the community's standard of living, which impacts the well-being of its residents, both in terms of infrastructure and facilities. Fishing is not exclusively a profession for men; some women often accompany and assist their husbands in their work, such as providing information, archery, providing fishing equipment and gear, and assisting with bait collection. The following table illustrates the livelihoods of the Bajo Mola community.

Based on data obtained from the 2024 village profile, the total number of Bajo Mola fishermen was 3,358 (41.72%) out of a total population of 7,858. Meanwhile, the number of Bajo people who earn other livelihoods (not fishing) is 204 (25.5%). The unemployed population includes Bajo children aged 0-14, and the unemployed are Bajo Mola people who are physically and mentally unable to work, totaling 4,296 (55.7%).

The Bajo Mola community is predominantly Muslim. In addition to Islamic law, their belief in their ancestors remains strong in their social life. The Bajo believes that their ancestors at sea will protect them, demonstrated by traditional ceremonies and special rituals at sea known as the Duata ritual. The common language used in daily life is Bajo, in keeping with the background of the population, which is entirely Bajo. Indonesian is used in formal activities such as schools and offices.

From an early age, children are taught to speak their native language, Bajo, which is steeped in cultural significance. The Bajo people are known for their language. Their uniqueness lies in the fact that wherever they live, whether spread across Indonesia or abroad, their language remains the same, despite the presence of dialects or accents that have been contaminated by the culture of their homeland. This is what continues to endure and is a leading force for the Bajo people in maintaining their identity amidst the changing world.

b. The Role of Bajo Mola Women in the Development of Sustainable Ecotourism

The role of Bajo women in the development of sustainable ecotourism in Wakatobi is very important and strategic. In this context, Bajo women are not only natural resource managers, but also stakeholders who contribute significantly to the sustainability of marine ecosystems and local culture. In efforts to improve the family economy, the role of Bajo women is to act as distributors of marine products carried out by fishermen. The activities of Bajo women who play a role as distributors cannot be separated from utilization that prioritizes sustainability. This is done because the results of fish caught by illegal fishing are not good or unsaleable in the market.

"We only sell high-quality fish caught in the reefs, because if the fish are caught using dynamite or sedatives, no one will buy them—so it's pointless to have a large catch if we can't turn it into money. That's why we make sure to sell only the best fish. When we catch high-quality fish, the reefs are protected, so we can make a good profit, and the fish habitats remain safe, ensuring a steady supply of fish."

Understanding that environmentally conscious catches are more profitable, Bajo women consistently emphasize to fishermen the importance of catches that do not damage coral or fish. Bajo women recognize that healthy coral reefs and oceans are marine ecotourism assets that must be maintained not only to ensure abundant fish catches but also to consider future catches. The following illustrates the economic activities of Bajo women at the central market, selling their catch.



Figure 2. Bajo Women's Activities in the Local Market of Wakatobi Regency

The Bajo people, and specifically women, play a direct role in conservation efforts. The Bajo culture, which considers the sea a garden, encourages the community to maintain sustainability (Marlina et al., 2021). Furthermore, through their active involvement in the development of ecotourism initiatives, Bajo women have demonstrated their ability to integrate traditional knowledge with modern practices. They act as tour guides, develop traditional culinary arts, and craft artisans, not only boosting the local economy but also strengthening their cultural identity. As stated by the Village Head of Mola, regarding the role of women in tour guiding and traditional culinary development,

"We have made efforts to maximize the role of women, particularly in ecotourism. Of the 15 members of the tourism management team, 6 are women. In the culinary sector, the team is 100% female, and there is also a dedicated culinary package. They serve a variety of Bajo-style dishes—essentially kukure and all kinds of seafood—to our guests." (Interview Results, 2025).

This statement was confirmed by the Bajo women who are among the administrators of Lepa Mola.

"There are canoeing guides who take guests out in canoes while telling stories, so it's not just about paddling—they describe what they see and relate it to the lives of the Bajo people. So there are men who paddle, while the female guides simply tell stories to the guests. There are also those involved in walking tours; they stop at several spots we've predetermined and agreed upon, and the locations are set. They walk to those points, pointing out what they see while explaining it. Many of these activities are things guests might never have experienced before, so every aspect of the Bajo people's daily life is described in detail. Then I take over the storytelling; I usually talk about the Bajo tribe's astronomy—that's a nighttime activity—and there's one person specifically assigned to translate; whenever we bring foreign guests, we must be accompanied by this woman.... there's also a culinary package; for the culinary tour, women from each village are part of the package; besides serving the food, they also present the dishes to the guests" (Interview Results, 2025).

Demonstrating a strong social commitment, 60% of the income earned by this community is allocated to various community empowerment activities, including environmental waste management initiatives and educational activities that connect Bajo children with the legacy of ancestral astronomical knowledge that has guided their maritime journeys for centuries.

"We typically use 60% of the profits we earn from this organization for community service activities. We've carried out two major initiatives: the first was a waste management project in these five villages, which involved the youth group and several other staff members; and the second was our social fund, which we recently used to bring together Bajo children still in school (elementary and middle school) to gather in a place like this. We then reminded them that even though they use cell phones and watch TV, there is knowledge from our ancestors that they must not forget—that this great knowledge is gained through experience, specifically knowledge of the stars. So we've done this several times, and from the profits we earn at this organization" (Interview Results, 2025).

Furthermore, there is a Bajo women's community focused on developing culinary entrepreneurship by producing various high-value seafood products, from tuna floss and seaweed sticks to sustainably produced seafood snacks. This was confirmed directly by Mrs. Royani, the head of Kube Mekar Bahari.

"There are sea grape chips, processed fish products, tuna floss, tuna fish sticks, tuna crackers, dried tuna strips, and seaweed dodol. In addition to seafood products, I make virgin coconut oil, face masks (moisturizing powder), brooches made from fish scales, and keychains made from fish scales." (Interview Results, 2025).



Figure 3. Processed seafood products made by Bajo women

The activities of Bajo women are not limited to tour guiding and culinary development, but also include the production of handicrafts that support the creative economy based on local culture that prioritizes skills, creativity, and traditions passed down from generation to generation.

"We recycle plastic waste and woven crafts to make bags, and we also use shell waste. We're actively involved here in creating crafts as souvenirs from Wakatobi. You'll find all kinds of bamboo weaving crafts here, as well as items made from recycled waste, including fish scales." (Interview Results, 2025)

Furthermore, Wakatobi's traditional woven fabrics, inherited from their ancestors, are highly sought after by visiting visitors. These woven fabrics are crafted into bags, wallets, scarves, kumpurui (headbands), and more. Thus, Bajo women's involvement in ecotourism not only enriches the tourist experience but also creates new jobs and improves the well-being of the local community. Each activity they undertake demonstrates their ability to adapt traditions to a broader context, while simultaneously promoting the value of local wisdom to the outside world. To maintain the sustainability of marine ecosystems, Bajo women play a role not only in developing the creative economy but also actively participate in coastal environmental conservation campaigns.

"I usually tell people—both mothers and children—not to throw plastic waste into the ocean, and I usually confront them directly. Yes, the immediate impact I usually mention is that plastic waste thrown into the ocean can kill fish because they'll eat it, mistaking it for jellyfish and the like. I also tell them not to treat the ocean like a trash can." (Interview Results, 2025)

Overall, the role of Bajo women in developing sustainable ecotourism in Wakatobi is a clear example of the collaborative power of tradition and innovation. Through their dedication and passion, Bajo women not only maintain their cultural identity but also inspire future generations to continue contributing to the preservation of the ecosystem and cultural heritage in their region. This success demonstrates that women's involvement in the ecotourism sector is crucial and has a profound impact on society and the environment.

2. Discussion

Tourist interests are grouped based on the type of trip or activity they choose. One form of tourism that has recently become increasingly popular is ecotourism. According to (Lee & Jan, 2019), ecotourism is travel to relatively unspoiled and minimally exploited natural areas with the goal of enjoying the natural beauty, studying flora and fauna, and experiencing local culture in an authentic setting while preserving the area's environment. Key characteristics of ecotourism include environmental conservation efforts, environmental education, and providing economic benefits to local communities (Sino et al., 2016; Hasana et al., 2022).

The main principles of ecotourism include: 1) Concern, responsibility, and commitment to environmental preservation; 2) Development carried out through consultation and agreement with local communities; 3) Providing tangible benefits to the well-being of local communities; 4) Respecting the social, cultural, and religious values of the community; and 5) Compliance with regulations and provisions related to the environment and tourism (Arida, 2014). According to Suryanegara et al., 2015, the Bajo people are an ethnic group that lives by wandering across the vast oceans, often referred to as sea nomads. They are one of the tribes that rely on the sea as their primary source of livelihood. Generally, they rely on simple technology to meet their daily needs and maintain their livelihoods (Nurhaliza, 2019), who stated that the Bajo people rely heavily on boats for almost all their activities. For them, boats are more than just a means of transportation. It is said that the traditional Bajo boat, formerly known as a *soppe*, measures approximately 3x2 meters with a sail in the center. The *soppe* is used not only for travel and fishing but also as a temporary residence while at sea. Besides the *soppe*, several other types of boats are used by the Bajo people, including the *Leppa*, *Solo-solo*, *Bodi*, and *Jojolor*.

Like other regions in Indonesia, the Bajo people live a sedentary life at sea or along the coast. The sea is their primary source of life, known as *pannangmamie ma di laok* (a place of livelihood at sea). They apply principles closely related to their life at sea, namely *pinde kulitang kadare*, *bone pinde sama kadare*, which means moving Bajo people to land is the same as moving turtles to land. This principle illustrates that for them, life at sea is an inseparable part of their identity and way of life (Suyuti, 1996:17). In fact, they will experience discomfort if they do not hear the waves (*pidi tikolo'na lamu nggai makale goya*). This expression illustrates how deeply the Bajo people are connected to the sea, showing that their lives are seemingly inseparable from the sound and presence of the ocean. The sea has become a core part of their lives, providing a sense of comfort and familiarity. According (Nurhaliza, 2019) The Bajo Sampela community as a whole practices Islam; nevertheless, they continue to uphold the customs and traditions passed down by their ancestors. Their customs and beliefs are deeply intertwined with the sea, given that most of their lives are spent at sea. Various rituals in their lives—such as those related to birth, marriage, healing, and the circumcision required by Islamic law—all have a close connection to the sea. The sea is not only their source of life but also an integral part of their traditions and spirituality.

Since its inception, Wakatobi has strived to fully implement ecotourism practices possible. The Bajo people, with their maritime traditions, play a role in creating authentic and immersive tourism experiences, attracting more visitors to experience their daily lives. However, community participation, including the role of women, in the tourism sector remains suboptimal. Understanding their role is crucial for the development of sustainable, community-based tourism. The presence of women in these communities not only strengthens social structures but also positively impacts sustainable and inclusive tourism development.

Bajo women, with their local knowledge of seafood processing, traditional crafts, and various cultural rituals, play a crucial role in preserving and passing on this traditional knowledge to the next generation. They are not only involved in the economic aspects of tourism but also in cultural and environmental preservation. They play an active role in activities involving tourists, such as introducing local crafts and organizing cultural festivals showcasing Bajo traditions. Bajo women are involved in the community's economic and social activities, particularly when men are at sea. Bajo women play roles not only in the domestic sphere but also actively participate in economic activities such as seafood processing, trade, and, most recently, their involvement in the tourism sector.

In sustainable development, the principles of participation and equality can be implemented through various community empowerment activities, including women's empowerment in various development activities, including ecotourism. Ecotourism practices are not merely business travel packages but also showcase natural and cultural attractions that prioritize environmental education and boost the local economy (Marlina et al. 2022). The success of ecotourism can be assessed through community-based management, including the role of women in its implementation.

The research findings indicate that women play a strategic role in sustainable ecotourism management in Wakatobi Regency, both as primary and supporting actors in economic activities and environmental conservation. Women are involved in homestay management, local culinary provision, handicraft production, and environmentally-based tourism education activities.

This involvement aligns with findings that women are crucial actors in community-based ecotourism due to their social and ecological closeness to the environment (Maulidiyah et al., 2023). Furthermore, local women, such as those from the Bajo community, play a role in building partnerships and maintaining ecotourism sustainability through local wisdom (Risna et al., 2025). Conceptually, this reinforces the ecofeminist approach, which positions women as crucial agents

in environmental sustainability (Agarwal, 2010).

Bajo women play a multidimensional role in sustainable ecotourism, encompassing economic, social, and cultural aspects. Bajo women are involved in economic activities such as tour guides, traditional culinary managers, and handicraft makers. For example, Mrs. Hasmiati is a cultural tour guide and Mrs. Royani is a seafood processing entrepreneur. Through this involvement, women not only strengthen their family's economy but also play a vital role in the development of their communities and society. The economic activities carried out by women span various sectors, all demonstrating their potential to be a key driver of economic growth.

In addition to their roles as housewives, many Bajo women (Bajo Mola) are active in ecotourism activities, serving as distributors for fishermen's catches, tour guides, artisans, traditional culinary managers, and even cultural storytellers. In this context, their participation in ecotourism is not merely a service, but also a manifestation of a deep commitment to environmental conservation and community empowerment. Their presence in this industry demonstrates a remarkable ability to innovate and adapt, combining local wisdom with sustainable practices. This not only strengthens their roles within their families and communities but also contributes to broader economic development, creating new opportunities and expanding their reach into areas that may have previously been limited, while simultaneously enriching themselves and their communities. This is a perfect example of how women can balance multiple roles in life, enriching themselves and their communities.

Equally important is the role of Bajo women as social agents, focused on interacting and participating in various social activities in their communities. Bajo women actively preserve culture through traditional stories, rituals, and the transmission of skills to the younger generation. They educate the younger generation about the importance of preserving the surrounding ecosystem and preserving natural resources for future enjoyment. With their ability to adapt and innovate, Bajo women not only strengthen their cultural identity but also inspire positive change in society. Through their active role as storytellers, they bridge the gap between the older and younger generations, ensuring that cultural values remain alive and relevant in the modern context. Bajo women play a vital role in supporting the concept of sustainable ecotourism, which is grounded in conservation, community participation, and environmental education. Based on interviews, Bajo women play several roles:

- a. Involved as distribution agents for the utilization of marine resources in local markets and to various regions outside Wakatobi.
- b. Cultural tour guides (canoeing and walking tour guides).
- c. Storytellers of traditional marine culture and knowledge.
- d. Craftsmen and MSMEs producing seafood and handicrafts.
- e. Educating the importance of the environment based on local Bajo culture.

Women's involvement in ecotourism also reinforces the principles of conservation and education (Arida, 2014). Furthermore, this study confirms the findings (Esti Hasrawaty et al., 2017) that women's involvement in ecotourism not only increases family income but also strengthens cultural identity. For example, Bajo women in Wakatobi have successfully packaged traditions such as star telling and traditional culinary traditions as tourist attractions. These roles reflect the categories of productive, social, and contemporary roles according to Astuti (1998) and Hubies (in Aulia, 2018). They are not only involved in economic activities but also in cultural preservation and community empowerment.

By exploring local potential, they provide an engaging and educational tourism experience for visitors. Through informative tour guides, they not only share knowledge about their environment and culture but also raise awareness about the importance of ecosystem preservation. The presence of women in this ecotourism structure is not only an actor but also a symbol of the Bajo people's strength in preserving their nature and culture. Through their active involvement in various aspects, Bajo women have proven themselves to be invaluable agents of change, making significant contributions to the sustainability of their ecosystems and the cultural identity they pride themselves on. SDG Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Gender equality is a human right. Gender equality is also a prerequisite for achieving all gender-specific goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including Goals 3, 4, 8, and 16. Target 5.1 aims to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. Specifically, Target 5.1 establishes a legal framework that promotes, enforces, and monitors gender equality in employment and economic benefits. This aligns perfectly with the objectives of ecotourism development.

Women's participation in ecotourism management contributes significantly to the achievement of SDG 5, particularly in improving access to economic resources, participation in decision-making, and strengthening women's capacity. Research shows that women's

involvement in the local economic sector can improve community welfare and the quality of development (Purba & Wahyuningsi, 2023). Furthermore, women's role in village development also strengthens the implementation of SDGs locally (Aura & Mun, 2024). Women who have access to education and training tend to be more active in decision-making and resource management (Widiastuty, 2018).

However, research also indicates obstacles such as low representation of women in strategic positions and the persistence of gender bias in policies (Purwanto & Aziz, 2024). This presents a challenge to achieving comprehensive gender equality. Women make a significant contribution to maintaining environmental sustainability, particularly in community-based conservation activities. In Wakatobi, women are involved in waste management, coastal ecosystem preservation, and environmental tourism education. Studies show that women play a crucial role in conservation activities such as mangrove planting and coastal resource management (Maulidiyah et al., 2023). Furthermore, indigenous women also play a role in maintaining environmental balance through practices based on local wisdom (Savira & Honosutomo, 2023).

This role demonstrates that women contribute not only economically but also play a key role in maintaining ecosystem sustainability, a crucial pillar of ecotourism. Despite their important role, women still face various challenges in ecotourism management, including limited access to education and training, gaps in decision-making, and patriarchal social norms. Previous research has shown that the tourism sector still faces gender disparities, including in terms of access to resources and employment opportunities (Lestari, 2024). Furthermore, the integration of gender perspectives into development policies is a barrier to optimizing women's roles (Dewi, 2017).

This situation highlights the need for more inclusive and gender-responsive policy interventions. To strengthen women's roles in sustainable ecotourism management, several strategies are needed, including capacity building through training, strengthening women's institutions, and implementing gender-based tourism policies. Gender-inclusive leadership is a crucial approach to increasing women's participation in decision-making (Purwanto & Aziz, 2024). Furthermore, integrating gender perspectives into development planning can accelerate the achievement of SDG 5 more effectively (Aura & Mun, 2024).

D. Conclusion

Bajo women play a central role in the development of sustainable ecotourism through active involvement as distributors of marine catch products that prioritize sustainable use, tour guides, seafood processing and handicraft micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and preservers of local values. These roles not only support the family and community economy but also strengthen Bajo cultural identity within tourism activities.

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