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FEMINIST POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND WOMEN'S RESISTANCE: STRUGGLES FOR ACCESS, CONTROL, AND POWER OVER SAGO IN EAST SERAM, INDONESIA

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Abstract:

The transformation of the sago management system in East Seram, from a subsistence-based practice rooted in customary traditions to a commodified framework within a neoliberal market, has created gender disparities in natural resource governance. This study adopts a Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) approach to examine various forms of systemic exclusion faced by women sago processors, as well as the resistance strategies they develop amidst the intersection of capitalism, patriarchy, and customary relations. Using a critical ethnographic method through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions across five villages from August to October 2024, involving 30 informants, data were coded thematically using grounded theory principles. The research reveals that women have lost access and control over sago, while being marginalized from the local ecological knowledge systems that have supported community sustainability. However, women are not passive; they create alternative ecological spaces through collective, symbolic actions and daily negotiation practices. Women's bodies, labor, and ecological knowledge function as mediums of resistance against exclusive and patriarchal power structures. The findings suggest that the FPE approach provides a new analytical space for understanding unequal socio-ecological relations, while also emphasizing the importance of recognizing women's agency in building just and sustainable food systems.

Keywords: Feminist Political Ecology, women sago processors, resistance, gender inequality, capitalism, East Seram.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Eastern Indonesia, sago is not merely a staple food but a fundamental component of the socio-ecological systems that have sustained Indigenous communities for centuries (Hospes, 1963; Knaap, 1981). In East Seram, Maluku Province, sago stands at the center of subsistence practices and holds profound significance within the local cosmology. Its value transcends the material; it is also deeply symbolic and spiritual, reflecting a close interconnection between people, nature, and traditional knowledge systems (Boufakar, 2023).

Although sago plays a central role in sustaining indigenous ways of life, gender dynamics in the commodification process of sago, particularly from a feminist ecological perspective, have received limited attention. Along with the liberalization of the natural resources sector after the Suharto era, the commodification of sago has resulted in inequalities in natural resource management and altered gender roles in sago processing. This transformation shifted sago from a subsistence-based, collective product to a commodity integrated into the neoliberal market (Rachman, 2012; Kadir,

2019), which has implications for shifts in governance, benefit distribution, and social relations structures, which were previously closely tied to customary values and ecological relationships.

This process of restructuring has not only reshaped the economic landscape but also reconfigured power relations within society. Access to, control over, and distribution of resources have become increasingly centralized in the hands of male actors and local capitalist networks. Meanwhile, women—who once played a central role as custodians of ecological knowledge and primary processors of sago—have been marginalized from key economic decision-making processes and the distribution of benefits (Elmhirst, 2011; Arora-Jonsson, 2011). This shift illustrates how structural gender inequalities are reinforced through economic transformations that privilege capital accumulation and male dominance in resource governance systems.

Capitalism and patriarchy operate in tandem, redefining the value of sago as not merely an economic commodity, but as a contested site of social and symbolic conflict. As a result, women not only lose control over land and harvests but also face discrimination within the socio-ecological structures of their communities. These inequalities exacerbate the marginalization of women, diminishing their agency in natural resource management systems. The combined influence of capitalism and patriarchy generates persistent inequities, with socio-ecological structures increasingly reinforcing male dominance.

Findings from fieldwork conducted in five villages in East Seram—Kian Darat, Artafella, Angar, Gaur, and Kilfura—reveal that although women play a crucial role in sago production, they lack bargaining power in determining its economic value or distribution. Women are confined to the domestic and subsistence spheres, while men dominate the market and distribution domains. This pattern reflects systemic exclusion reinforced by masculine customary relations and politico-economic structures that uphold patriarchal values (Benda-Beckmann, 2008; Cahyono, 2009).

Behind the commodification of sago lies a disintegration of relational values that once positioned women as central ecological actors. Market-driven development models tend to overlook the dimensions of social reproduction and women's local knowledge, which are foundational to the sustainability of traditional food ecosystems. The issue is not merely the absence of women from the formal economy, but also the marginalization of alternative knowledge systems that shape human–nature relationships (Shiva, 1988; Rocheleau et al., 1996).

Within this framework, the Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) approach offers a critical lens to understand the interlinkages between gender injustice and ecological degradation. FPE conceptualizes nature as a space socially and gendered produced, where access to resources is shaped by political power, social identity, and ecological positioning (Rocheleau et al., 1996). The central concern is not only who accesses and controls sago, but also how women, as ecological subjects, respond to exclusion through symbolic resistance, collective action, and negotiation within and beyond customary structures.

Through the lens of Feminist Political Ecology, this article analyzes how women sago processors in East Seram respond to structural inequalities in natural resource governance. The contestation over access, control, and authority over sago becomes a socio-ecological battleground shaped by the intersections of capitalism, patriarchy, and customary power. Within this exclusive system, women are not merely victims but also agents of change who reclaim their living spaces

through resistant ecological practices. From the margins, they cultivate collective strength and envision a just and sustainable life—a grassroots ecological politics forged from below.

II. METHODS AND PARTICIPATION

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical ethnographic method to deeply examine the socio-ecological dynamics and forms of resistance among women sago processors in East Seram. This approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of the cultural, political, and ecological contexts that influence the position and experiences of women in natural resource governance. In line with the principles of feminist political ecology, this research not only highlights power relations over resources but also explores how women's bodies, spaces, and knowledge are involved in everyday ecological production (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Nightingale, 2006).

Data were collected through three main methods: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD). During the three-month field research (August–October 2024), the researcher lived and actively engaged with the community activities in five villages: Kian, Artafella, Angar, Gaur, and Kilfura. In participatory observation, the researcher not only observed but also participated in sago processing practices, attended customary meetings, and built informal relationships with local women as part of a strategy to establish trust and foster more reflective engagement (Spradley, 1980).

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach with 30 key informants, including women sago processors, customary leaders, and local actors involved in the sago distribution chain. Focus group discussions were held to explore collective experiences and map out forms of everyday resistance that are not always visible in formal spaces. Throughout the implementation of all methods, women's participation was not positioned as passive subjects of research, but as active knowledge producers involved in the construction and articulation of their own narratives (Haraway, 1988; Arora-Jonsson, 2011).

Data analysis was conducted thematically using open and axial coding processes, identifying patterns of meaning, social categories, and emerging resistance narratives from the field data. This process was guided by the framework of Feminist Political Ecology and intersectionality to examine the intersections between gender, class, custom, and ecology within the structures of inequality faced by women. The validity and credibility of the data were strengthened through methodological triangulation and member checking with key informants, ensuring that the analytical outcomes ethically and accurately represented their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

By integrating participatory qualitative methods and the critical framework of feminist political ecology, this study aims not only to capture the conditions of women sago processors but also to open a space for critical reflection on structural injustices and the potential for bottom-up resistance.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Resistance from the Kitchen

The resistance of women sago processors in East Seram emerges in spaces often regarded as domestic realms: the kitchen, steaming with activity from dawn, and the sago groves traversed

repeatedly. Within the framework of Feminist Political Ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996), the kitchen is not merely a place of care but an arena for the production of ecological knowledge, value negotiation, and the articulation of power. The subsistence activities carried out by women form an alternative economic rhythm that subtly yet strategically challenges the logic of the market and patriarchy. Thus, the kitchen becomes a site of micro-politics that crosses the boundary between social reproduction and ecological production (Elmhirst, 2011).

In this narrative, Amina Buaklofin (41) from Gaur Village, as expressed in her interview on August 20, 2024, states: "We continue to work hard because of external demands for increased production." This statement illustrates how capitalist logic infiltrates the domestic sphere, turning the kitchen into an extension of the global market. Reproductive labor, which was once based on the needs of the community, now has to follow the rhythm of external demands (Haraway, 1991). Mechanization, which should have alleviated the burden, instead accelerates the production process and eliminates space for women's social relations—time to talk, share, and build affection—that play a crucial role in sustaining the community.

"Previously, work was slow, and we could chat while working. Now it's rushed, and there's no time for conversation. Everything has to be turned into money," said Amina Buaklofin, reflecting the shift in the rhythm of labor among female sago processors in East Seram. This statement reveals the colonization of time and bodies by capitalist logic, which prioritizes production efficiency over communal values. From a Foucaultian perspective (1977), women's bodies are positioned as disciplinary subjects, subjected to subtle surveillance and the internalization of productivity norms. Biopower operates through work rhythms, the use of mechanical tools, and the moral responsibility to meet market expectations—subtly yet profoundly regulating their daily lives.

The acceleration of work is not merely a technical issue but also part of a power configuration that links capitalism, patriarchy, and ecological change through women's bodies within the framework of Feminist Political Ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Mechanization and market expansion have fragmented women's collective space into individual activities, reducing sago processing labor to a purely productive function. This process erodes the social reproduction space that has historically supported relations between women and local ecological balance. Therefore, everyday narratives like Amina's expression are not just personal testimonies but material representations of the operation of power that reshapes the relationship between women, nature, and labor values within the contemporary socio-economic and political landscape (Haraway, 1991; Povinelli, 2011).

Field findings in this study indicate that in ten villages in East Seram, around 180 women are involved in ten sago processing groups. These women not only preserve traditional practices but also innovate in the production process. They mobilize other women to participate in the mutual cooperation of sago processing, as well as actively engage in marketing and price negotiations. One of the key innovations they have made is transforming small sago sheets—traditionally purchased by Chinese traders—into new variants such as large sago sheets, sliced sago, and sago flour. This step reflects the women's efforts to reduce dependency on Chinese traders and create alternative sales channels that are more autonomous and kinship-based, even though these new variants do not fully meet conventional market standards.

In Gaur Village, Amina Buaklofin emphasizes the importance of women's economic independence in the face of market inequalities. She states, "We must dare to break free from

dependence on the Chinese Boss, and create our own path." This statement illustrates resistance to an imbalanced economic system and the women's strategy to maintain production autonomy. While this change poses risks to environmental sustainability, the effort remains a form of resistance against capitalism and patriarchy. Through this initiative, the women in Gaur Village fight for economic independence while challenging the dominance of exploitative markets.

In more detail, the forms of resistance carried out by the women sago processors in Gaur Village and surrounding villages manifest in daily work strategies that are subtle yet effective in challenging the logic of global capitalism and the normalization of modern work discipline. Fostering a spirit of autonomy, as emphasized by Amina Buaklofin—who explicitly calls for breaking dependence on external traders—these women began to re-engineer their production practices. One such form of resistance is the reduction of sifting stages from twelve to eight, as well as the direct packaging of sago without the visual selection process that has long been the market standard. This action not only responds to market demands in a more efficient and independent manner but also demonstrates how women reshape production rhythms and manage labor value according to their own socio-ecological context, without being overly bound by external market influences.

This action should not be read as a form of work quality degradation, but rather as an expression of *resistance by redefinition*, a process in which subordinate actors—in this case, women sago processors—claim space to redefine the value of work and product quality based on collective logic, local experience, and the needs of their community, rather than the criteria set by exploitative external market structures. From a Feminist Political Ecology perspective, this strategy reflects a rejection of capitalist domination that disciplines women's bodies through work time, production aesthetics, and value relations dictated from the outside. The alteration of work rhythms, modification of production standards, and sago packaging without strict selection represent acts of resistance that revive local wisdom and advocate for economic autonomy in the face of a market logic focused solely on efficiency and profit.

Thus, the resistance that unfolds is not in the form of spectacular political mobilization, but rather as *everyday resistance* (Scott, 1985; Bayat, 2013) that occurs through work rhythms, pauses, and modifications in technical procedures. In this context, women's bodies become dynamic political sites where they collectively negotiate power by reconfiguring work standards and value distribution, while also maintaining agency within domestic production spaces. These practices demonstrate that resistance to capitalism and patriarchy can be localized, fluid, and deeply rooted in the daily lives of women's communities, without necessarily taking the form of direct confrontation with the state or market. Alongside this, these resistance strategies reveal how women are reshaping the socio-ecological dynamics around them in ways that are subtle yet impactful, turning the kitchen into an arena of resistance that takes place without public spotlight but still advocates for community welfare and environmental sustainability.

The form of resistance of female sago processors is also evident in the non-monetary exchange practices found in villages such as Kian, Gaur, and Artafella. In these areas, sago is not merely positioned as a market commodity, but as an integral part of an exchange network based on local values such as solidarity, kinship, and social reciprocity. In this context, the barter system—often labeled as a heritage of traditional economics—demonstrates its vitality as a strategy of resistance against the dominance of capitalist market logic. Barter, in the hands of female sago processors,

functions as a mechanism for controlling prices and distribution that is not subject to market fluctuations or the intervention of external traders.

An attitude like that shown by Fatmah Kianlau (31), "I'll keep it first, I don't want to sell it cheap right away" (Interview, August 21, 2024), illustrates how control over time and sales value becomes an arena of resistance just as political as open demonstrations. Amid a distribution system that often biases the bargaining position of women and marginalized communities, the decision to delay selling or choose barter is not a form of backwardness or irrationality, but a smart strategy to maintain economic autonomy. This attitude also reflects women's ability to use the space of time and control over their production goods as a way to negotiate the value of their work and set a fairer price, far from the pressures of exploitative market capitalism.

2. Resistance from the Sago Hamlet (Sago Forest)

For women in East Seram, the *dusun sagu* or sago forest is not merely seen as an ecological landscape, but as a living space deeply entwined with their social, cultural, and spiritual existence. From a feminist political ecology perspective, the sago forest represents a relational space imbued with power dynamics—a historical terrain created and managed by women, but gradually restructured through patriarchalization, commodification, and modernization. This transformation has not only displaced women from resource management but also altered the meaning and social relationships previously embedded in this ecological space.

The historical traces of women's roles in managing the sago forest remain strongly embedded in the collective memory of the community. Across various communities in Maluku and Papua, sago is symbolically understood as a representation of the female body or soul—a giver of life, a protector, and a guardian of ecological balance (Adriani & Kruyt, 1951; Williamson, 1979; Wenno et al., 2017). In the Bati Kian Darat community, for instance, sago forests are even used as dowry and passed down through the maternal line (Pelupessy, 2012). Even within patrilineal inheritance systems, women continue to play a significant role as original owners or transferors of rights over sago forests, demonstrating the continuity of their position in resource governance structures.

More than just a site for food production, the sago forest is an ecological landscape that shapes the knowledge, values, and daily practices of women. Activities such as *finaku* (catching fish and eels), *fain kulat* (gathering mushrooms), *fain mofun* (preparing medicine), and *pagar teu* (gardening) create spaces for intergenerational interaction and serve as a medium of informal education for women. In this context, the sago forest can be understood as a feminine social institution—a domain where women are not only users of resources but also producers of ecological knowledge, guardians of collective memory, and key actors in sustaining the environment.

1) Finaku

Finaku, a collective practice among women in catching fish and managing water resources for subsistence, has shaped a foundation of ecological knowledge deeply internalized in the everyday lives of communities in East Seram. This knowledge not only supports food security but also constitutes an integral part of the community's socio-ecological relations. However, the expansion of large-scale, extractive sago processing industries has led to the degradation of river ecosystems. Waste from these industrial processes pollutes formerly clean and productive waterways, directly

interrupting the sustainability of *finaku* and limiting women's access to the ecological and social spaces that have long sustained their livelihoods.

In this context, rivers function not merely as ecological landscapes but as *living pedagogical spaces*—sites for embodied and contextual intergenerational knowledge transmission. Nafsiah (41), a mother of four, explained how rivers once served as classrooms where women taught their daughters ecological skills:

> "We used to teach our daughters by the river—about fish, medicinal leaves, and which foods to avoid. Now the water is polluted, I'm afraid to let my children go there."

This testimony reveals that *finaku* is far more than a subsistence activity; it is a socio-cultural arena where women serve as managers, educators, and custodians of local ecological knowledge.

In Haraway's (1988) terms, practices like *finaku* represent a *situated epistemology*—knowledge rooted in lived experiences within specific local spaces and times. Yet, the degradation of river ecosystems due to industrial sago waste disrupts the continuity of this knowledge. Women's nature-based knowledge faces not only extinction but also marginalization from dominant systems of knowledge production. These disruptions fracture women's relationships with the ecological landscapes that are integral to their identities and the reproduction of their knowledge systems.

Asiyah Keliandan (57), a female head of household in Kian Village, described how sedimentation from sago waste has shallowed the once-vibrant streams used for *finaku*:

> "The places that were once our favorite spots for *finaku* have become shallow due to sago industry waste."

Such ecological damage not only limits women's access to aquatic and food resources but also burdens household economies. When rivers can no longer be relied upon for subsistence, women like Asiyah are forced to purchase fish from itinerant vendors—raising household expenses and reinforcing dependence on market mechanisms.

This condition illustrates that the loss of ecological spaces like rivers impacts not only the economic dimension of women's lives but also erodes the cultural and epistemic foundations of communal social relations. Within a feminist political ecology framework, *finaku* is not simply a food procurement practice—it is a social arena where power, gender, and ecology intertwine to shape specific social configurations (Rocheleau et al., 1996). The knowledge women generate through their embodied experiences in natural landscapes—the *body-territory relations*—is not an ecological essentialism, but a socially constructed knowledge rooted in relational and contextual practices.

The river pollution caused by capitalistic and masculinist industrial sago expansion produces layered exclusions: women are dispossessed from productive ecological spaces and pushed further to the margins of an economic-political system that devalues local knowledge. However, women's responses are not always openly confrontational. Asiyah, for example, preserves the logic of *finaku* through tactical adaptation—seeking alternative food sources and reorganizing household spending—which exemplifies a form of *everyday resistance* (Scott, 1985). This politics of the

everyday is at the heart of feminist political ecology: resistance that grows from domestic spaces—from the kitchen, the river, and the bodies of women who persist and sustain life amid ecological crises and structural inequality. It is a form of ecological politics that radically challenges the masculine domination of nature and life itself.

2) The Fain Kulat (Sago Mushroom)

In the traditional sago processing system, waste such as pulp is not regarded as useless trash. On the contrary, sago pulp is typically piled up around the processing site and left to decompose naturally. However, for women who process sago, this waste is not merely residue; it serves as a medium for the growth of the sago mushroom (*Volvariella* sp.), known locally as *kulat*. This mushroom, aside from being consumed as a side dish—usually sautéed or boiled—is also an important source of nutrition for families living under economically constrained conditions. Mamatua Bini (62), a household head from Gaur Village, shared, "When kulat appears, it means we can eat well. We don't need to buy vegetables from outside. But now it's rare, because all the waste is thrown straight into the river."

Sago mushrooms have significant nutritional value, containing various essential amino acids such as leucine, isoleucine, valine, lysine, methionine, and histidine, as well as being rich in unsaturated fatty acids that can help lower low-density lipoprotein levels (Chang, 1999; Jordan, 1993; Widiyastuti, 2005). A study by Abbas et al. (2011) found that every 100 grams of fresh sago mushrooms contains 4.00 grams of protein, 2.99 grams of carbohydrates, and important minerals such as calcium and potassium. When converted to dry weight, the protein content reaches 53.48%, making it a highly nutritious alternative food source compared to other commercial products.

However, modernization in sago processing has altered this ecological system. The use of machinery in sago production now generates large volumes of waste that are no longer piled up but directly disposed of into the river. As a result, the habitat for sago mushrooms is diminished, which in turn worsens the degradation of the river environment—a vital part of community life. For women, especially the elderly and single mothers, the loss of access to alternative food sources like sago mushrooms increases their vulnerability. They become more dependent on vegetables from traveling vendors, whose prices fluctuate and supply is unstable. Mamatua Janiang (61) shared her experience, "In the past, when we searched for kulat, we could bring home plenty. Now we search for half a day and find only two or three. But we still go looking—not just for the kulat, but because we can talk and share stories with others too."

In this context, foraging for kulat should not be seen solely as a subsistence practice but also as a form of ecological and cultural resistance. When women, often marginalized from formal customary forums, gather around sago groves to search for mushrooms, they are not only maintaining access to food sources but also creating informal spaces for discussion. In this process, they exchange knowledge, experiences, and grievances about their circumstances—forming a kind of micro-politics of women in ecological contexts often overlooked by formal actors and the state.

This phenomenon echoes the narrative developed by Anna Tsing (2005) in her research on matsutake mushroom foraging. Tsing shows that mushroom foraging is not merely an economic activity but also a social and ecological practice imbued with affective, ethical, and political dimensions. Like matsutake, sago mushrooms grow in liminal spaces—between ecological destruction and the possibilities of new life. Women foraging for sago mushrooms enact a quiet

form of resistance against an economic-political order that frequently excludes their voices and needs. They reclaim structurally marginalized spaces and transform them into places of life and resistance.

Thus, foraging for kulat is more than just a means of securing food. It is a socio-ecological institution that sustains women's resilience, solidarity, and resistance against structural exclusion. When sago waste, which once supported mushroom life, is now discarded into rivers, not only is the ecosystem damaged, but also the social spaces of women that have long been part of their daily life and collective struggle are lost.

3) Fain Mofun

Forests have long served as essential life-support systems for living beings. For Indigenous peoples and local communities, forests are not merely ecological spaces but also cultural, spiritual, and political realms. They provide critical resources such as food, water, clean air, and especially medicinal plants, which are prepared using ecological knowledge passed down through generations. The tradition of preparing medicine from the forest, known in the local language of East Seram as *fain mofun*, is an integral part of community healthcare practices and reflects women's ecological knowledge.

In villages like Kian, Angar, and Gaur, women are familiar with dozens of medicinal plant species growing around the sago forests behind their homes. In times of emergency, such as childbirth or children's fever, the forest serves as the first line of aid. These women are not entirely dependent on healthcare facilities, which are often located far from their settlements and frequently unresponsive to urgent needs. As shared by Mamatua Mianina (67), a traditional midwife from Angar village:

> *"When a woman is about to give birth, we must prepare ngonggot linana leaves, kaman kalifan, lansa leaves, turmeric, clove leaves... all are boiled to be consumed for forty days. That's how it's always been."*

However, in the past two decades, *fain mofun* practices have faced serious threats due to ecological degradation caused by land conversion. Much of the sago forest has been transformed into commercial plantations such as clove, nutmeg, and oil palm, or allocated for new settlements through the Village Fund program. The expansion of capitalism into rural areas has increasingly marginalized women's living spaces—including their access to medicinal plants.

Roy Ellen (2009) noted that one of the greatest threats to the sustainability of the sago ecosystem is land destruction through drainage, the introduction of high-yield crop varieties, and development policies that disregard local knowledge. Field notes from Boufakar (2023) also reveal a significant correlation between the loss of women's ecological spaces and the rupture in the transmission of traditional medicinal knowledge.

Nevertheless, women do not submit passively to these conditions. They continue to resist through everyday practices. One such form of resistance can be seen in their decision to persist with *fain mofun*, even though childbirth now commonly occurs in hospitals or community health centers. As explained by Hajar Rumakat (50), a traditional midwife in Kian village:

"Now many births happen at the clinic, but three days after coming home, I still go collect leaves from the sago forest. So that the mother can regain strength, her milk flows well, and her belly shrinks quickly. That's my task. It can't just disappear because there are doctors now."

This practice shows that resistance does not always take the form of public protest. From a feminist political ecology perspective, as elaborated by Rocheleau et al. (1996), women's resistance often emerges in the form of everyday politics—through food preparation, caregiving, and healing practices. When the state and market intervene in women's bodies with standardized medical protocols, women uphold their autonomy through the traditional knowledge they continue to practice and pass down.

Ironically, the very local knowledge of medicinal plants that is now under threat has received global recognition. In the United States, for instance, the Mayo Clinic has successfully developed antibacterial agents from extracts of the *atun* tree (*Atuna racemosa*), a species that grows abundantly in the Maluku region, by accessing *Herbarium Amboinense* by Georg Rumphius. Meanwhile, according to GP Farmasi (2018), about 95 percent of pharmaceutical raw materials in Indonesia are still imported. Local biodiversity exports contribute only around 20 percent to the national pharmaceutical industry's total turnover, which amounts to IDR 60 trillion (Berry, 2019).

This situation reflects epistemic and economic inequality in the governance of natural resources and healthcare: local knowledge developed over centuries is disregarded domestically while being recognized and commercialized abroad. Therefore, when women in East Seram continue to step into the forest to gather leaves, bark, and roots for medicine, they are not only sustaining their livelihoods but also preserving local epistemologies and resisting a centralized, masculine, and industrial health system.

4) *Pagar Teuteu*

In East Seram, the practice of *pagar teuteu*—small-scale gardening for subsistence needs—remains a vital livelihood strategy for elderly women, female-headed households, and women from impoverished families. This activity typically takes place on the fringes of sago forests, which were once collectively managed. However, under the patrilineal inheritance system, women's access to land is restricted; they must obtain permission from male siblings or close male relatives who claim rights over the land in the name of the clan (*etar*), yet exercise unilateral control over it.

This situation has worsened with government policies introducing small-scale cash crops such as nutmeg, cloves, and cocoa through village empowerment programs and seed distribution aid. Although these programs are ostensibly inclusive, in practice they have strengthened male control over land by providing seeds and administrative legitimization such as land certificates. In this context, women are entirely marginalized from access to agricultural assistance and formal land ownership. This shift illustrates how commodity-based development has deepened gender-based exclusion.

The conversion of sago forests into nutmeg plantations or residential land has triggered intra-clan conflicts, especially because land control typically falls to the eldest son. Ironically, much of this land is later sold to outsiders, while women have no authority over either the process or its outcomes. Historically, however, sago forests were part of women's dowries or property. This

tradition is documented in Wallace's report (1962), which highlights sago's role as a vital medium of exchange in trade relations, and in Pelupessy's research (2012), which asserts that in the Bati community, sago forests were part of women's *bridewealth*—a symbol of gendered economic rights and control.

This transformation reflects a profound shift in resource governance systems—from models that granted women agency in accessing and managing sago forests, to male-dominated systems of ownership based on monetary and state documentation. Roy Ellen (2003) notes that the transition from sago forests as dowries to cash as marital exchange is closely linked to the influence of external ethnic groups, including Arabs and Chinese, and to the penetration of monetary economy into local value systems. This change is not merely economic but also epistemic—shifting local understandings of land, care, and life toward the logic of commodification.

For women, especially the elderly, restrictions on *pagar teuteu* practices represent a concrete form of marginalization. In addition to exclusion from land access, they face ecological threats such as the growing population of wild boars that destroy crops. Kadir's study (2017) reveals that the 1999 Maluku conflict and the migration of Christian communities have disrupted ecological balance, including the uncontrolled growth of wild boar populations due to the loss of previously communal control practices.

In Gaur Village, for instance, the migration of Christian communities to Makariki, Central Maluku, left a void in the landscape management system, which had relied on inter-community coordination—including hunting and forest monitoring. This shift has not only caused an ecological crisis but has also increased the workload of elderly women, who now must tend gardens alone, face the risk of crop failure, and remain dependent on access that is socially and gender-wise precarious. "In the past, we tended our gardens together. The men helped guard the forest. Now I do it alone. The wild boars come and eat everything I plant. I no longer have the strength, but what else can I do? If I don't garden, what will I eat?" (Interview, Mamatua Bini, September 2024).

This testimony illustrates how the absence of once-supportive collective systems has alienated women from their communal safety nets. At the same time, it reveals new, layered vulnerabilities, where women face dual challenges: ecological degradation due to changing collective management systems, and exclusion from land and resource access—further deepening gender and social inequalities. These protracted conflicts and structural changes not only threaten the sustainability of gardening practices but also erode women's autonomy in determining their economic futures.

However, amid an increasingly unfavorable environment, *pagar teuteu* has become a symbol of resistance. As emphasized by Kais Kilwarani (45), a woman from Kian Darat Village: "I keep planting, because this land must remain alive." This statement not only reflects a will to survive but also embodies a form of care politics (Tronto, 1993)—an ecological and ethical practice that centers care for land, community, and life as resistance against dominant value systems that emphasize exploitation and accumulation. In this view, gardening is not merely about subsistence; it is a medium for restoring just and communal ecological relations.

Thus, gardening is not only a subsistence strategy but also an expression of women's ecological politics that transcends domestic boundaries. It is a form of *everyday resistance*, enacted through the body, the land, and memories of a more ecologically and gender-just past. Through *pagar teuteu*, women not only plant food but also cultivate memory, relationships, and hope for a more

sustainable and equitable world. It becomes a convergence point between ecological awareness and gender consciousness—intertwined in every step taken by women who, though marginalized, continue to play a central role in maintaining the balance of nature and community.

3. Women's Resistance Strategies in Customary Politics and Village Forums

In the political landscape of villages and the still predominantly masculine and centralistic customary structure of East Seram, women sago processors have begun to take interventionist steps—not merely to participate, but to disrupt the order that has long excluded them. Their actions do not simply emerge in demonstrative forms, but in ecological resistance that stems from their everyday closeness to the land, water, and food. Within the framework of feminist political ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996), women's embodied experience as food producers and stewards of the living landscape becomes a concrete political foundation, not abstract, and takes place in spaces previously considered "non-political"—kitchens, gardens, rivers, and their own bodies (Agarwal, 1992).

Since 2020, several women have begun to lead collective actions to challenge the distribution of power at the local level. For example, Asiyah Rumadaul (50), a sago processor from Kian Darat Village, led a road blockade and a boycott of the village office as a protest against corruption and the unequal distribution of social assistance. "I'm not going to stay quiet. The village head is taking the aid for himself," she said in an interview (August 19, 2024). This action is not just an expression of anger, but a contestation of the power relations that dictate access to resources (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987), as well as a form of "micro-intervention" targeting the fragile points of local decision-making systems.

In village and customary forums, women use poststructural strategies to insert alternative narratives. They voice their knowledge through pantun (traditional poetry), folklore, and local symbols, avoiding the formal language dominated by men. As explained by postcolonial theory (Foucault, 1980; Bhabha, 1994), this strategy can dismantle the dominance of official discourse through a medium considered 'minor,' but which is, in fact, effective in shaping community opinion.

However, structural barriers remain strong. Hasna Rumakat (43), the only woman in the Village Consultative Body (BPD) of Kian Darat, revealed that the issue of sago management never enters the village deliberation agenda. "We women just listen. Sago is said to be a kitchen matter, not development," she stated (Interview, August 20, 2024). From an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), this reflects layered exclusion: women are not only marginalized because of gender but also because of their social position, class, and limited education.

When sago is deemed to have no economic value in formal schemes like BUMDes (village-owned enterprises), women's ecological knowledge undergoes systematic invisibilization. From the perspective of Ribot and Peluso (2003) on access and control over resources, it is evident that women lose authority over the resources they have historically managed. This is not just about their absence in forums but about the loss of their capacity to influence the direction of benefit distribution and economic decisions.

A similar experience was shared by Tarwia Siladja (29), the Secretary of the Village Administration in Artafela, who stated that although women process sago every day, decisions related to the village budget for this commodity remain monopolized by men (Interview, August 24,

2024). This shows that formal representation of women in institutional structures does not automatically guarantee recognition of their ecological epistemology (Harcourt & Escobar, 2005). Therefore, resistance strategies must not only rely on the presence of women in forums but also need to be pushed towards substantive recognition of the knowledge they possess and practice.

Interestingly, domestic spaces become an alternative political arena. In the face of such inequality, some women practice food sovereignty by rejecting government rice aid and returning to processing sago. This step is not nostalgic but a form of resistance against masculine and exclusionary development logic. Within the framework of ecofeminism (Shiva, 1988; Plumwood, 1993), the kitchen and fields are not just spaces of social reproduction, but centers of knowledge production, identity, and equitable ecological relations.

Everyday decisions like choosing sago over rice, preserving traditional processing techniques, or maintaining folklore, carry deep political dimensions. In the logic of everyday politics (Bayat, 2013), women's resistance emerges in non-confrontational yet subversive forms—disrupting the order slowly through continuous small actions.

Finally, this practice also carries an intergenerational claim on the future. By passing down ecological techniques and values to their daughters, sago processors create cultural and ecological continuity that challenges the direction of extractive and ahistorical development. Their resistance is not only a reaction to inequality but also a political projection for a fairer, more equal world rooted in the community.

4. Seizing the Sago Pathway

The transformation of women's position in the sago economy is not only temporal—through generational trajectories—but also spatially articulated. A case study in Kilfura village reveals that a geographically marginalized space becomes an arena of contestation over the power of commodity distribution. Although Kilfura does not have sago forests, it occupies a strategic position within the regional logistics network, including direct access to the national sea toll route. Paradoxically, women in this village experience exclusion from the economic value of sago circulating through these routes. This situation reflects what Elmhirst (2011) describes as the spatialization of patriarchy—where women are locked into subordinate positions through men's control over mobility, price information, and distribution modes.

In the downstream sector, the women of Kilfura are active in processing sago, such as slicing, drying, and selling it in the form of sago cakes, but they have no access to raw materials, trade networks, or market information. The distribution of value is also uneven; women work as productive laborers without power over price setting or distribution channels, making them agents of labor within a gendered and capitalistic economic system (Carr & Thompson, 2014). This inequality is reinforced by the spatial-economic structure, where villages near the sago source (upstream) hold greater bargaining power compared to villages like Kilfura, which only act as product circulation points (downstream). Thus, the geographical distribution of sago logistics is not neutral but forms a spatial hierarchy that deepens gender, class, and location-based exclusion (Truelove, 2011).

However, since 2023, resistance to this dominance has begun to take shape through women's intervention in the distribution pathways. Through the Integrated Village Economic Transformation

(TEKAD) program, ten female sago processors in Kilfura, led by Sarifat Kelian, successfully organized the shipment of sliced sago to Misool and Fakfak (West Papua) using the sea toll scheme. This strategy represents a form of reclaiming infrastructure (Rocheleau et al., 1996), utilizing state facilities to reverse the distribution power relations that have been controlled by large traders and male actors.

Field interviews indicate that this initiative has had significant economic impacts. Siti Nafisa Maba (41), one of the shipment participants, reported a net profit margin of over one million rupiah per shipment, compared to only Rp10,000 per local transaction through Chinese traders in Geser. This difference reflects the formation of an alternative economy based on women's solidarity and local knowledge, distancing itself from the extractive and centralizing capitalistic system.

The sea toll, originally viewed as a masculine workspace—such as being a dockworker for men at the port—has been reinterpreted by women as a community-based distribution platform. Since 2019, Sarifat and her group have actively built an independent shipping network, breaking the dependency on large traders, and symbolically seizing control over the flow of commodities that were previously beyond the reach of village women.

The feminist political ecology approach provides a critical interpretative framework to understand this dynamic. The distribution route, in the hands of the women of Kilfura, is no longer a neutral infrastructure but is redefined as a political arena that can be reassembled based on experiences of exclusion and emancipatory aspirations. By building new distribution networks, women create an alternative economy that is relational, community-based, and directly challenges capitalist dominance (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In this context, state logistics like the sea toll are not merely commodity channels but instruments of resistance against gender, spatial, and economic inequalities rooted in colonial history and patriarchal capitalism.

5. Politics of Knowledge, Women's Bodies, and Community Cinema

In the midst of a social structure that historically places young women's bodies within the shadows of domestication and reproduction, alternative spaces have emerged to challenge gender relations and the existence of young women in East Seram. Three reading spaces—Lapak Baca Kian, Walang Baca Gaur, and Luma Baca Artafella—not only function as places of cognitive education but also as arenas for political articulation, connecting women's bodies, space, and social experience within an ecofeminist context. In this perspective, these spaces deconstruct the dichotomy between public and domestic and reject essentialist narratives that localize women solely to biological functions and the household (Shiva, 1989; Rocheleau et al., 1996).

These reading spaces also play a role in reversing the meaning attached to women's bodies, which have traditionally been understood as objects of domestication. In the narrative of Lili Rumakat (16), who transformed from "a girl who only sifts sago" to a subject who critiques her mother's workload, we see how literacy education provides space for young women to develop gender awareness. This is a form of epistemic resistance—where new knowledge allows women to dismantle the naturalization of their subordination while also challenging the domestic economic structures that fail to recognize women's labor as productive work (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015).

Walang Baca Gaur, with the figure of Putri Kianlaut (19), presents an example of how this space serves as a site for deconstructing the narrative of the "backward village" and the

"marginalized woman." At the Literacy Jamboree of the SBT District, Putri presents herself as a subject who dismantles the narrative that freezes the identity of village women within the discourse of development (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980). This space helps illustrate that women's identity is a social construction negotiated through symbolic practices, including literacy and performing arts.

The presence of Luma Baca Artafella also brings an intersectional perspective, where Aida Rumbori's (18) experience shows how young women's bodies, situated in overlapping oppression based on gender, age, class, and access to education, become increasingly vulnerable to systemic exclusion. Luma Baca provides a space to voice these experiences as a form of structural awareness that liberates, linking local knowledge with the empowerment of young women (Crenshaw, 1989).

Additionally, the community cinema initiative, Wanu Sinema, plays an important role in producing visual narratives about the lives of sago farmers, presenting ecological experiences that are part of the resistance against dominant narratives. In the film *Beta & Sagu – Baju Wasiat* (2024), for example, Arman's story portrays the tension between the desire to continue education and the pressure to preserve the generationally inherited sago farming profession. The film hints at the identity conflict within agrarian transformation and the commodification of local food, with "baju wasiat" (inheritance shirt) serving as a metaphor for the inheritance of ecological values and generational responsibility toward sustainable natural resource management.

In *Es Krim Sagu* (2024), the film uses sago-based ice cream as a symbol to illustrate how resistance to the hegemony of rice-based food can grow in the everyday lives of children. It shows how ecological values based on sago remain relevant and can serve as a foundation for resistance against the dominant food culture that ignores local wealth (Truelove, 2011; Nightingale, 2011). *Paket Sagu* (2024) also highlights the generational gap with local food, showing the process of ‘alienation’ experienced by Ongen, a university student returning to reconnect with his local identity through sago.

The success of *Beta & Sagu – Baju Wasiat*, which won an award at the 2024 Regional Language Short Film Festival, underscores the importance of local cultural production as a form of political struggle. M. Kasim Rumain, the scriptwriter and Program Manager of Wanu Sinema, emphasizes that these films are expressions of "moral responsibility" for the younger generation of sago farmers to voice their ecological experiences in audiovisual language. In this context, the sago tree, depicted as a teacher of life, reflects the philosophy of collective leadership and mutualistic relations between humans and nature.

Thus, local cinema in East Seram is not merely an entertainment medium but a tool for struggling against the dislocation of ecological values caused by market logic. This community cinema creates a third space where the subaltern can speak and reclaim their ecological identity as a form of political, pedagogical, and transformative resistance (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Harcourt & Escobar, 2005). These three reading spaces and one medical practice space, together with community cinema, demonstrate how resistance to structural inequalities in East Seram society can be realized through various forms of care practices, learning, and social organizing that subvert dominant power.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the economic-political transformation of sago in Eastern Seram has marginalized women from their historical role as key actors in the management of local resources. Capitalism and patriarchy operate simultaneously in redefining the value of sago, creating a masculine and exclusive power structure. The feminist political ecology approach provides a sharp framework for understanding the interconnectedness of gender inequality, ecological exploitation, and power relations in the local context. Amid a system that sidelines them, women sago processors demonstrate their resistance capacity through everyday practices that are not always recognized as formal forms of resistance—ranging from collective sago processing, the preservation of local knowledge, to role negotiations in customary forums. This finding affirms that women's resistance is not merely symbolic, but a transformative strategy that challenges structural dominance and offers a more just ecological vision. Therefore, any resource management policies in indigenous territories need to consider the gender dimension, local social relations, and women's knowledge as the foundation for sustainability.

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