



Empowering Coastal Women Vendors: Implementing Blue Economy and Marine Livelihoods in Suli Village, Central Maluku Regency, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the transformation of beach areas in Suli Bawah, Central Maluku Regency, Maluku Province, Indonesia, initially used as domestic backyards and kitchens, into vibrant tourist destinations managed predominantly by women. Using a qualitative, phenomenological case study approach involving semi-structured interviews with five female vendors, the research explored the socio-economic impacts of this shift on local livelihoods. The findings revealed that these women have successfully established businesses, offering refreshments, local delicacies, and rental services for beach equipment, while enhancing the site's appeal through improvements such as night lighting and seating arrangements. The transition has significantly increased their income, particularly during holidays and school breaks, fostering economic empowerment and resilience. However, challenges such as competition, resource management, and long-term sustainability remain. This study highlighted the potential of community-driven tourism initiatives to promote women's economic participation and provided insights into the broader implications of the blue economy for coastal communities. Future research should explore strategies to address these challenges and to expand the model's applicability in similar contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the blue economy has gained global prominence as a sustainable approach to harnessing ocean resources while ensuring environmental conservation and socio-economic development. It emphasizes inclusive growth, ecosystem stewardship, and innovation, particularly in coastal communities. However, translating these macro-level narratives into local practices remains a challenge—especially in small island settings where livelihoods are often informal, and gender roles are deeply rooted.

Suli Village, located in Central Maluku Regency, Maluku Province, Indonesia, provides a compelling case of how blue economy principles are being localized. In this coastal area, women vendors play a pivotal role in shaping the informal tourism economy, particularly through small-scale food and service businesses. One notable example is the rise of female-led enterprises selling *rujak* (fruit salad) and refreshments, which have become part of the village's tourism identity.

Although previous studies have highlighted the dual role of coastal communities in environmental conservation and economic development (Smith, 2018; Johnson *et al.*, 2020), there is limited research examining how women vendors in such communities engage with and internalize blue economy practices. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of women vendors in Suli Village.

Using a qualitative, phenomenological case study approach, this research investigated how these women perceive, adapt to, and shape the evolving blue economy landscape. It also examined the intersection of gender dynamics, economic activities, and sustainability practices, contributing to a deeper understanding of inclusive development in coastal Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The blue economy has emerged as a global framework aimed at promoting the sustainable use of ocean resources while ensuring economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. Introduced formally at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the concept has since gained attraction across policy and academic spheres. In the Indonesian context, the blue economy encompasses initiatives ranging from marine surveillance, coastal tourism, and aquaculture development to renewable energy and institutional reforms. However, scholars highlight that the operationalization of these goals remains uneven, particularly in peripheral regions where local economies are predominantly informal and governance structures are fragmented.

In practice, one of the core tensions within the blue economy lies in balancing resource extraction with conservation imperatives. Studies have pointed to the paradoxical challenge of “doing more with less,” where efforts to generate wealth from marine resources must be tempered by limits to ecological carrying capacity (Attri & Bohler-Mulleris, 2018; Burgess *et al.*, 2018). This challenge is especially pronounced in small island and coastal communities where economic activities such as fisheries, tourism, and small-scale trade are deeply intertwined with environmental sustainability. Dornan *et al.* (2018) and Durett (2022) noted that blue economy narratives are often framed through economic lenses, sometimes overlooking the socio-cultural dimensions that shape local realities.

A growing body of literature emphasizes the importance of inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches within blue economy initiatives. Women play pivotal yet often

underrecognized roles in coastal economies, contributing not only as laborers but also as entrepreneurs, caregivers, and knowledge holders. In many developing countries, including Indonesia, women are actively engaged in micro-enterprises linked to marine and coastal resources, such as seafood vending, craft production, and beach-based services (**Djoric, 2022**). Despite this, they face persistent barriers such as limited access to finance, exclusion from policy processes, and cultural constraints on mobility and public participation (**Kamberidou, 2020; Karim et al., 2023**).

Historically, the contributions of women in the fisheries and tourism sectors have been overlooked or marginalized within mainstream development narratives. **Burton (2012)** and **Sharma et al. (2024)** emphasized the need to recognize women's labor in the coastal economy as both economically significant and socially transformative. Their engagement in community-based tourism ventures demonstrates how informal entrepreneurship can challenge gender norms while supporting household incomes and community cohesion. In this regard, coastal women vendors serve not only as economic actors but also as agents of spatial and cultural transformation.

Community-driven tourism has been widely discussed as a pathway for achieving sustainable development in coastal regions. It promotes local participation, environmental stewardship, and economic diversification, often through small-scale enterprises that are embedded in local cultural practices. As shown in the work of **Barnett et al. (2016)**, such models have the potential to empower marginalized groups, especially women, by creating platforms for entrepreneurship and leadership. However, these initiatives also face structural challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, seasonality, and regulatory inconsistencies, which can hinder long-term viability.

Methodologically, qualitative research, particularly with a phenomenological orientation—offers valuable tools for exploring how individuals and communities experience and interpret socio-economic change. This approach centers on the subjective meanings that people assign to their lived realities, making it especially suitable for understanding the agency of women operating in informal coastal economies. **Roux et al. (2017)** highlighted the strength of transdisciplinary and narrative-driven research in capturing complex interactions between policy frameworks and local practices, which are often mediated by cultural norms and gender relations.

While there is considerable global literature on blue economy development and women's empowerment, there remains a lack of empirical research that focuses specifically on informal women entrepreneurs in small coastal communities in Indonesia. Much of the existing work has focused on formal fisheries, large-scale tourism, or state-led conservation projects, leaving a gap in our understanding of how blue economy principles are interpreted, contested, and localized by everyday actors. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing more context-sensitive and equitable policy frameworks that reflect the diverse realities of coastal communities.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on inclusive blue economy development by focusing on the lived experiences of women vendors in Suli Village, Central Maluku, Indonesia. It examines how these women have adapted to and shaped the evolving socio-economic landscape through micro-scale tourism enterprises rooted in cultural practices and local identity. By linking global development narratives with grounded local realities, this research provides valuable insights into the intersection of gender, informality, and sustainability in the context of community-based coastal development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

This study was conducted in Suli Village, Central Maluku Regency, Maluku Province, Indonesia—an area known for its informal, community-led beach tourism activities. The village provides a unique setting to examine how global blue economy principles are translated into everyday practices by local women vendors

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the discourses and practical implications of the blue economy through the lived experiences of five women sellers operating within coastal areas. A case study method was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the spatial, narrative, and normative diffusion of blue economy discourses in local contexts. By focusing on women sellers in a specific coastal community, the research aimed to bridge macro-level narratives with micro-level realities, examining how these women internalize and adapt to the dominant discourses shaping their livelihoods.

A phenomenological approach was utilized within the qualitative framework to capture the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants. This method is suitable for exploring how individuals interpret and make sense of their everyday realities (Creswell, 2013), making it particularly appropriate for understanding the socio-economic and cultural dynamics experienced by the women vendors in Suli Village.

Participants and criteria

The study focuses on five women sellers who have been actively engaged in coastal-based businesses for at least three years. Participants are selected based on specific criteria:

- Occupation: They must be involved in selling goods or services directly related to coastal tourism or local marine resources, such as seafood, handicrafts, or tourism-related services.
- Residency: Participants must reside in the study area and have an active role in the local community.

- Age: Women aged 25–50 are included, as this range typically represents active economic participants balancing livelihood responsibilities with familial roles.
- Experience: Preference is given to women who began their businesses during or shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as this period often marked a shift toward informal coastal economies.
- Willingness: All participants must voluntarily agree to share their experiences through interviews and focus group discussions.

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. To ensure ethical integrity, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality. This research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research involving human subjects.

Data collection methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to explore individual narratives while ensuring that core themes related to spatial, narrative, and normative diffusion are addressed. FGDs allow for the examination of collective experiences and interactions among participants, fostering a deeper understanding of shared challenges and strategies. Participant observation in the women's workplaces offers contextual insights into their interactions with customers, their adaptation to market demands, and the influence of blue economy policies on their livelihoods.

Data analysis

The data obtained from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This method was selected for its flexibility and its ability to identify, analyze, and report patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis followed the six-step framework developed by **Braun and Clarke (2006)**, which provided a structured process to ensure rigor and depth in interpreting participants' narratives.

The first step involved familiarizing the researchers with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes, allowing for initial impressions and ideas to emerge organically. In the second step, open coding was conducted manually to identify key phrases, expressions, and patterns that appeared frequently or carried significant meaning in relation to the research questions.

These initial codes were then organized into broader categories during the third step, where the search for emerging themes began. The process of reviewing and refining themes in the fourth step ensured that each theme was supported by rich data extracts and meaningfully reflected the participants' experiences. This iterative process involved constant comparison between themes and raw data, allowing the researchers to validate the coherence of each thematic category. In the fifth step, the themes were clearly defined and named, capturing the essence of each category in concise yet meaningful labels.

These included themes such as “spatial transformation of the beach,” “economic adaptation through tourism,” “gendered entrepreneurship,” and “navigating informal regulation.” Finally, the sixth step involved producing the analytical narrative, in which these themes were interpreted in the context of broader theoretical and empirical discussions related to the blue economy, gender dynamics, and community-based development.

Through this approach, the study was able to reveal how women vendors in Suli Village construct meaning from their evolving roles in a changing coastal landscape, and how they internalize, adapt to, and reshape the normative expectations of the blue economy in their everyday lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The transformation of Suli Bawah beach into a local tourism destination has had a profound effect on the livelihoods and agency of coastal women vendors. Previously, this beach area was perceived as an extension of the household—used for drying laundry, preparing meals, or informal gatherings. Today, these same spaces have been reimagined as commercial zones where women sell local snacks, beverages, and offer simple rental services to visitors. One respondent recalled, “This used to be just the back of our house. We’d cook here and dry our laundry, but now it’s where we sell drinks and snacks.” This transformation reflects what **Burton (2012)** describes as a reconfiguration of domestic spaces into public and productive spaces, driven by women’s agency in informal economies. The shift demonstrates how spatial adaptation can serve as a strategy of economic participation within the blue economy framework, even in the absence of formal intervention.

Women’s involvement in transforming the coastal space has not been limited to passive participation. Instead, they have actively contributed to shaping its character and usability. The addition of chairs, simple tents, lighting, and beach decorations reveals a bottom-up approach to tourism development. These actions mirror the principles of community-driven tourism, where local stakeholders—not external developers—define and implement improvements. This aligns with **Barnett *et al.* (2016)**, who argued that small-scale, locally controlled tourism initiatives are more likely to benefit marginalized groups and foster sustainable livelihoods.

A notable impact of this spatial and economic shift is the increase in income, particularly during weekends, holidays, and school vacations. As one vendor explained, “During school holidays or weekends, we earn more in a day than we used to in a whole week.” This seasonal peak in earnings has introduced new forms of economic stability, especially for women who previously relied solely on irregular informal work. Their ability to respond to visitor demands, diversify their offerings, and reinvest in their businesses reflects a form of adaptive entrepreneurship—one that emerges organically from the community rather than through formal policy channels. This finding supports

studies by **Kamberidou (2020)** and **Karim *et al.* (2023)**, which highlight the significance of informal women entrepreneurship in filling economic gaps in underserved coastal areas.

In addition to economic gains, the women have also taken initiative to extend business hours into the evening by installing lighting along the beach. “Installing lights was a game-changer. Now, people stay longer, even at night, enjoying the cool sea breeze and the view,” noted a respondent. These actions illustrate both practical and symbolic aspects of place-making. Lighting not only increases safety and visibility but also transforms the beach into a social space beyond daylight hours, an act of reclaiming time and space for community use. This mirrors findings from community-based tourism studies, where such improvements are associated with stronger social capital and neighborhood cohesion (**Townsend *et al.*, 2024**).

Another significant theme that emerged from the data is the spirit of collaboration among women vendors. Rather than competing, many of them work together by offering complementary services, such as selling different types of food or coordinating pricing strategies. “We started working together to make the beach more attractive. Some of us bring fresh coconuts, others rent out beach chairs. It’s become a shared effort,” shared one participant. This cooperation exemplifies the horizontal governance structure often seen in grassroots tourism economies, which stands in contrast to the hierarchical management common in formal sectors. Such collective agencies align with the values of gendered resilience and community empowerment that are central to inclusive blue economy discourses (**Schutter, 2020**).

Despite these successes, challenges remain. The women highlighted issues such as increased competition during peak seasons, difficulties managing waste, and lack of long-term infrastructure support from local authorities. “It’s not always easy to manage the crowd during peak days, and sometimes cleaning up takes a lot of time,” said one vendor. These accounts echo concerns in the literature that informal community-led tourism, while empowering, often operates without adequate institutional support, which can threaten sustainability (**Durett, 2022**). Moreover, without formal recognition or integration into tourism planning, such initiatives may remain vulnerable to external shocks, regulatory changes, or land-use conflicts.

Importantly, the transformation of Suli Bawah beach was not initiated by state or NGO programs but emerged organically from the community—especially from the collective initiative of women. This challenges the prevailing assumption that blue economy development must be top-down or state-led. Instead, it affirms the potential of everyday practices and local adaptations in advancing the goals of sustainable, inclusive economic development. The women of Suli Bawah exemplify what **Schutter (2020)** calls “everyday blue economies,” where small, informal actors actively negotiate their place within larger ecological and economic systems.

Overall, the findings from this study contribute to the broader literature by offering a grounded example of how women's informal entrepreneurship can meaningfully participate in the blue economy. Through spatial innovation, collective labor, and culturally rooted services, these women not only support their households but also contribute to the resilience and identity of their coastal community. Their story underscores the need to recognize and support such initiatives, especially in regions where formal infrastructure is limited, but local resourcefulness is abundant.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the transformative impact of beach tourism on the lives of women vendors in Suli Bawah. By turning previously unused areas into thriving business spaces, these women have significantly improved their economic well-being and contributed to community development. Their entrepreneurial efforts, combined with cultural preservation and environmental stewardship, offer a model of sustainable small-scale tourism. The addition of amenities like lighting not only extends business hours but also enhances the overall visitor experience. However, the challenges of seasonality and increasing competition call for innovative strategies and external support to sustain these gains.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive blue economy development by presenting an empirical case of women-led, informal micro-entrepreneurship in a peripheral coastal setting—an area often overlooked in academic and policy discussions. The women of Suli Bawah demonstrate how localized, community-driven tourism initiatives can flourish even in the absence of formal interventions.

The findings suggest that local governments and development stakeholders should recognize and integrate informal female entrepreneurs into tourism planning. This includes providing legal support, infrastructure investment, and access to microcredit and business training. These steps would not only enhance the resilience of coastal communities but also validate the critical role women play in informal economies.

Ultimately, the long-term sustainability of such grassroots innovations hinges not only on the agency of the women themselves, but also on the creation of inclusive and supportive institutional ecosystems. Recognizing their contributions as central—not peripheral—to blue economy development is essential for ensuring equitable, resilient, and community-centered coastal futures.

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