

# Evaluating Women's Economic Empowerment During COVID-19 Pandemic in South Sulawesi, Indonesia

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**Abstract:** The factual condition resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has changed and impacted various aspects of Indonesian society. It also made women one of the vulnerable and affected groups, requiring them to face various challenges, including loss of livelihoods as family breadwinners, and gender-based violence. Outside of Java, the region with the highest number of COVID-19 cases is South Sulawesi Province, with a total of 62,672 cases. This had an economic impact on communities and families, particularly affecting women, especially domestic workers, and female heads of households. This research aims to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of government policies and programs in South Sulawesi Province regarding domestic workers and female heads of households. It directly conducted interviews with stakeholders from the government, women's organizations, and domestic workers and female heads of households. It found that the Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted women who are heads of households and female domestic workers. The situation for women leading households worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic as they had to navigate the crisis on their own. The situation and conditions of female domestic workers during the Covid-19 pandemic were also dire. Some of them were unilaterally terminated, while others were forced to work daily at their employers' homes, risking virus transmission during their commute due to inadequate personal protective equipment. Those who were laid off by their employers faced a crisis, as they had no income, especially when their spouses, who also worked in the informal sector, stopped working simultaneously. It revealed that both the government of South Sulawesi empowered female heads of households by distributing productive business capital assistance and providing support for female SMEs to access people's business credit. However, in contrast to the reality faced by female domestic workers, this group of women did not receive any social and economic assistance from the government during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Economic Empowerment, Marginalized Women, COVID-19, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

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## 1. Introduction

The factual condition resulting from the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic has altered and influenced various aspects of life in Indonesian society. Among the different aspects affected, the economic and social aspects are highly impacted. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on both micro and macro economies in Indonesia. In the context of the microeconomy, due to the government's social restriction policies reducing demand, industry players and providers of commodities will experience significant losses, (Triwidia., 2020) whether they want to or not. The business world has slowly started to crumble, leading to many workers being furloughed. (Muslim., 2020) In the context of the macroeconomy, the government has had to revise the national budget due to various emergency measures, such as providing fiscal stimulus packages (stimulus packages for businesses and affected communities) and reallocating funds to strengthen the healthcare sector in handling Covid-19. (Bareksa, 2020) This significant economic impact is experienced by the population, especially vulnerable groups such as women, particularly the most marginalized women who work in the informal sector as domestic workers and women who are the backbone of their families or heads of households. They are required to confront various challenges, such as the double burden, the loss of livelihood as the family's breadwinners, and gender-based violence. (Puspa., 2020)

In 2021, the region with the highest number of Covid-19 cases outside of Java Island was South Sulawesi, with a total of 62,672 cases (3.3%) of the population, (Kesehatan., 2021) comprising 9.19 million individuals (males: 4.56 million or 49.65%, and females: 4.63 million or 50.35%). (Kusnandar., 2021) To empower women, the South Sulawesi Provincial Government has focused on women's groups through online training related to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). It has also collaborated with the Family Welfare Movement (FWM) to empower women, especially homemakers. One of the activities involves empowering family agriculture by cultivating medicinal plants that benefit households (Interviewee 1).

The South Sulawesi Regional Development Agency concentrated on economic recovery in its planning programs for 2020 and 2021. For instance, the Women's Empowerment Office carried out programs that were not solely focused on women but also on all those affected by Covid-19, including heads of households, such

as husbands and children (Interviewee 2). The South Sulawesi Provincial Social Office, on the other hand, strived to assist socially vulnerable women, including domestic workers and female heads of households, by providing aid to families impacted by the pandemic. Support for homemakers was offered in the form of a food assistance package of 2.4 million rupiahs per family (Interviewee 3). The South Sulawesi Provincial Cooperatives and MSMEs Office involved women's groups in efforts to improve the economy during the pandemic by implementing policies that prioritize and empower women to enhance their family's economic well-being (Interviewee 4).

The South Sulawesi Provincial Government implemented various programs during the Covid-19 pandemic with the aim of empowering women. However, it is worth questioning whether these women empowerment programs involve the most marginalized groups of women, especially female domestic workers, and female heads of households. Therefore, this research aims to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of government policies and programs in South Sulawesi Province regarding domestic workers and female heads of households.

## 2. Research Methods

This study is descriptive-empirical research with a qualitative approach aimed at providing a detailed and accurate depiction, presenting the most recent data, documenting causal processes and specific mechanisms, and delivering a report on the background or context of a particular event. The research describes the practices of women's empowerment in a selected area in Indonesia that was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. (Kate Power, 2020)

Data collection techniques encompassed a literature review to gather secondary data through the examination of human rights regulations, academic papers in the form of journal articles, research reports, and books. Structured interviews were conducted to collect primary data through focused group discussions and in-depth interviews both online and offline interviews at the research sites. The respondents are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: List of Respondents**

| List of Respondents in Focus Group Discussion and In-Depth Interview |  |                        |
|--|--|------------------------|
| Respondent   | Institution  | Date of FGD/Interviews |
| Interviewee 1  | Department of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, South Sulawesi Province       | Friday, May 21, 2021   |
| Interviewee 2  | Regional Development Planning Agency, South Sulawesi Province                              | Friday, May 21, 2021   |
| Interviewee 3  | Department of Social Affairs, South Sulawesi Province                                      | Friday, May 21, 2021   |
| Interviewee 4  | Department of Social Affairs, South Sulawesi Province                                      | Friday, May 21, 2021   |
| Interviewee 5  | Empowerment of Women Heads of Household Union in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi Province     | Friday, April 30, 2021 |
| Interviewee 6  | Empowerment of Women Heads of Household Union in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi Province     | Friday, April 30, 2021 |
| Interviewee 7  | National Network Advocating for Domestic Workers in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province | Friday, April 30, 2021 |
| Interviewee 8  | National Network Advocating for Domestic Workers in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province | Friday, April 30, 2021 |
| Interviewee 9  | National Network Advocating for Domestic Workers in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province | Friday, April 30, 2021 |
| Interviewee 10   | National Network Advocating for Domestic Workers in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province | Friday, April 30, 2021 |

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively, with the first step involving organizing data according to their type, including primary data such as transcripts and notes, as well as a review of secondary data. The second step was coding, which assigned specific codes to the collected data. The analysis focused on efforts to achieve (i) women's well-being; (ii) women's access to resources and means of production; (iii) fostering critical awareness among women; (iv) mobilizing women's participation in empowerment policy processes; and (v) women's control over empowerment policy programs, as well as access to resources and means of production. (Sara Hlupekile Longwe, 2002)

### 3. Findings and Discussion

The South Sulawesi Provincial Government involved in women's empowerment includes the Department of Social Affairs and the Department of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). According to the South Sulawesi Provincial Social Department, they consistently have engaged women in assistance programs because their perspective has shifted from seeing women as objects to considering them as subjects. The engagement of women, particularly domestic workers, is related to education because their children must continue to attend school even while their mothers must work. Assistance for female heads of households is provided in the form of social support, amounting to 2.4 million rupiahs per family. However, the activities during the Covid-19 pandemic were still primarily focused on providing social assistance (Interviewee 4). The Small and Medium Enterprises Department, with the assistance of the Ministry of Cooperatives, organized entrepreneurship training in 2020 and 2021 for women on how to market their products. This training in South Sulawesi was provided to housewives who already had businesses, especially in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, the local government also aided in marketing and registering their trademarks, enabling them to grow and compete effectively for housewives and business operators (Interviewee 4).

Empowerment efforts for marginalized women's groups were carried out in the South Sulawesi Province through the fulfillment of economic rights during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the responsibility of the South Sulawesi Provincial government. This realized the mandate of the 1945 Constitution in Article 27, paragraph (2), which states that "Every citizen has the right to employment and a decent standard of living for humanity." Article 28 I (4) of the 1945 Constitution declares that "the protection, promotion, enforcement, and fulfillment of human rights are the responsibility of the state, especially the government". Indonesia's commitment to providing special protection for women to prevent discriminatory treatment and violations of human rights is further stipulated in Articles 45 to 51 of Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights. In relation to economic and employment rights, it is regulated in Article 49(2) of this Law, which states, "Women have the right to receive special protection in the execution of their work or profession against factors that may jeopardize their safety and/or health, especially in relation to women's reproductive functions." Therefore, the fulfillment of economic rights is constitutional and human rights.(Supardjaja., 2006)

As part of the international community, Indonesia, as a nation, has primary obligations on human rights, which include:(Rights., 2006)

1. To respect. This entails refraining from interfering with the enjoyment of human rights. For example, the state must abstain from forced eviction or arbitrary restrictions on the freedom to assemble.
2. To protect. This means that the state must take action to ensure that no one hinders the exercise of rights by their holders. For instance, the state must safeguard access to education by ensuring that parents and/or employers do not prohibit someone from attending school.
3. To fulfill. This implies that the state must take progressive steps to fulfill related rights. For example, by providing assistance to specific groups that are unable to realize their rights on their own, such as offering aid to economically marginalized groups.

The state's duty to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights is also known as the Limburg Principles.(United Nations, 2002) In the context of human rights, the state is positioned as a duty bearer, while every individual is considered a rights holder.(Syafi'ie., 2012) The state's obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill each contain elements of an obligation to conduct, requiring the state to take specific steps to realize a particular right, and an obligation to result, necessitating the state to achieve specific targets to fulfill measurable substantive standards.(Khairunnisa., 2018) Therefore, the discussion here is to analyze the responses of rights holders, in this case, domestic workers and female heads of households, to the empowerment programs and activities conducted by the South Sulawesi government, acting as the duty bearer, in fulfilling the economic rights of domestic workers and female heads of households.

An interesting finding from the research is that women's groups in South Sulawesi province have their unique ways of interpreting empowerment, especially within their roles as women within the community. Life experiences and involvement in organizations seem to serve as catalysts for the resilience of women's groups in facing the Covid-19 pandemic situation. Interviewee 5, a member of the Empowerment of Women Household Heads group in Bone Regency of South Sulawesi Province, received assistance in the form of food staples and mask-making training. The masks produced through this training were not only distributed to other group members of Empowerment of Women Household Heads but also to the impoverished community in the vicinity.

On the other hand, another member of this group, Interviewee 6, who used to run a stall at the market, however due to the Covid-19 pandemic, she rarely visited the market, causing her market goods to go bad. Consequently, she switched her profession to farming. Yet, she encountered difficulties again due to the high cost of seeds and fertilizers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she received assistance from the Family Hope Program without receiving any form of training. She also believed that the local government and the village government lacked initiative. The issue of women facing economic difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic was also prevalent in her village. She said that “the village government did not conduct a follow-up survey, appeared indifferent, and seemed unwilling to work”.

In contrast to the reality faced by domestic workers, Interviewee 7, a member of the National Advocacy Network for Domestic Workers, stated that the group of domestic workers received no social assistance whatsoever. She even expressed it plainly, saying that the government never cared about domestic workers. The existence of domestic workers was also never acknowledged. Many female domestic workers were laid off during the pandemic, making it even more challenging for them to meet their household needs. In such dire circumstances, the situation worsened due to the lack of government assistance, considering the uncertain status of domestic workers who have not been officially recognized as formal workers. Despite the marginalization of the domestic worker group, it does not mean that the women in the National Advocacy Network for Domestic Workers simply accept their situation. The women's group supported each other based on solidarity by identifying members in great need and providing them with essential supplies through their organization during the pandemic (Interviewee 8).

Interviewee 9 as a domestic worker, received financial assistance of IDR 600,000 from the central government three times. However, this aid was not specifically designated for domestic workers. In her sub-district, social assistance missed the target. In 2021, the assistance was discontinued due to a reduction in the aid by the central government (Interviewee 9). Interviewee 10 from the domestic worker group expressed that many complaints from the community stem from the mismatch between the government assistance recipient data. Common cases include individuals whose names were listed but did not receive social assistance during the distribution phase.

Not all forms of assistance are accessible to women's groups, whether in the form of cash social aid or job training and skills development. This condition was found across all research locations in South Sulawesi Province. Most of the population was unaware of government assistance, both from the central government and the South Sulawesi Provincial Government. The information available to the public was disseminated through word of mouth (Interviewee 5). This information was often non-transparent, leading to confusion among the public. This further complicated the distribution of social aid, aggravated by irregularly updated recipient data (invalid data) (Interviewee 7). Their hopes for fulfilling their economic needs during the pandemic were quite varied. Those who switched to farming hope for a decrease in fertilizer and seed prices, as well as an increase in their crop yields (Interviewee 6). Many also wished to be involved in government programs or receive training tailored for women's groups (Interviewee 8). Some also desire programs organized by the central government to be delivered directly to their communities, bypassing local governments, in order to ensure that assistance reaches the intended recipients more efficiently (Interviewee 10).

The government's programs and activities in South Sulawesi for the empowerment of women during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the duty to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights, are evaluated through the following approaches:(United Nations, 2002)

1. By omission, which refers to human rights violations occurring due to the state's failure to actively fulfill its obligations to protect and/or fulfill human rights. For instance, when the state fails to act in a situation where a specific ethnic group attacks another, or when it neglects to implement a free primary education system.
2. By commission, which involves human rights violations caused by the state actively engaging in actions that diminish the enjoyment of rights by their holders, such as prohibiting labor unions or the freedom to assemble.

In the research findings, it was revealed that there was no specific policy in place to manage social assistance to the community for female heads of household and domestic workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, the assistance that had to be provided to those in need, particularly women, was not accurately targeted. Additionally, there were disparities in treatment between female heads of household and domestic workers. The actions taken by the South Sulawesi government in the distribution of assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic could be categorized as discriminatory, as the aid was exclusively designated for specific groups of

women. These actions could fall under the "by commission" category, and this was also in line with the Limburg Principles, which state that "the state's failure to take necessary measures can be considered a violation of human rights and can result from acts of by commission".

Based on the findings, the South Sulawesi Provincial Government's efforts to fulfill the economic rights of women during the Covid-19 pandemic involved women in their programs and aid activities, as the perspective shifted from women being seen as objects to being treated as subjects. However, it is regrettable that there was still a highly marginalized group of women, namely female domestic workers, who were not included in these programs and activities. In this regard, it is evident that the South Sulawesi government did not collect actual data or implement systematic and sustainable monitoring and evaluation for women's programs. The collection of integrated data for social assistance to women in need during Covid-19 pandemic could be carried out by the South Sulawesi government through cooperation with the Population and Civil Registry Office, utilizing the National Identification Number to enable the government to monitor data on the population in need of social assistance due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With accurate data gathering, the South Sulawesi government could map out groups of women requiring social assistance or support in the form of training programs aimed at empowering them economically.

In the context of gender equality, the failure of the South Sulawesi government to pay attention to female domestic workers resulted in systemic and structural discrimination against this group of women during the Covid-19 pandemic. This could be avoided if the South Sulawesi government collaborated with women's groups or civil society organizations working in women's empowerment to distribute social assistance and carry out empowerment activities for women during the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### 4. Conclusion

In 2021, the South Sulawesi Province had the highest number of Covid-19 cases outside of Java Island, totaling 62,672 cases, which accounted for 3.3% of the population. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the South Sulawesi Provincial Government implemented various programs with a focus on economic recovery in its 2020 and 2021 planning efforts. These initiatives aimed to empower women and provide assistance to socially vulnerable groups, including women, by offering a food assistance package of 2.4 million rupiahs per family. These empowerment efforts for women align with the mandates of the 1945 Constitution and Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights, which place responsibility on the South Sulawesi Provincial government as the duty bearer. However, not all forms of assistance, whether in the form of cash social aid or job training and skills development, were accessible to all women's groups. The exclusion of female domestic workers from these programs and activities represents a violation of human rights, resulting from actions (by commission) on the part of the South Sulawesi government during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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