

Facing Challenges: Strategies of Female Farmers in Rokan Hulu Regency in Balancing Work and Family Life

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Abstract

This study explores the strategies employed by female farmers in Rokan Hulu Regency, Indonesia, in balancing dual roles as agricultural workers and homemakers. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 female farmers across 13 villages and 1 urban ward in Rambah District. The research identifies the underlying motivations for assuming dual roles, including economic necessity, family tradition, and personal identity, while also examining the types of work-family conflict experienced. Findings reveal that the most common conflicts are time-based, emotional, and behavioral, where women struggle to manage domestic duties alongside physically demanding agricultural work. To address these challenges, participants adopt adaptive strategies such as strict time management, role negotiation within the household, utilization of labor-saving tools, and reliance on community support networks. The study is grounded in Role Theory and the Work-Life Balance framework, highlighting how female farmers constantly negotiate conflicting demands in socio-economically constrained environments. The findings underscore the importance of gender-sensitive agricultural policy, particularly in providing support services such as childcare, flexible work arrangements, and psychosocial assistance. This research contributes to broader discourses on gender, rural labor, and agrarian resilience, and emphasizes the urgent need for structural interventions to alleviate the burden of work-family conflict faced by women in traditional agricultural systems.

Introduction

Rokan Hulu Regency, located in Riau Province, Indonesia, is one of the regions with significant potential in the agricultural sector (dpmptsp.rokanhulukab.go.id, 2023). In this context, the role of farmers contributes greatly to the local and national economy. The agricultural sector contributes 54.29% to the Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) of Rokan Hulu Regency (BPS Rokan Hulu, 2024). At the national level, it contributes 29.3% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (BPS, 2024). However, farmers, especially women, often face complex challenges in carrying out their work while maintaining a balance with family life. Women in Rokan Hulu Regency are not only family members who manage household affairs but also play a vital role in agricultural activities. They are involved in various activities ranging from planting, caring for, to harvesting agricultural products. However, while they are responsible for agricultural productivity, they also have to manage household tasks and their roles as mothers and educators for their children. Female farmers in Rokan Hulu Regency face significant challenges in their efforts to balance work in the fields and family responsibilities. One of the main challenges is limited time and energy. They must efficiently divide their time between agricultural work and family needs, including household chores and attention to their children. Additionally, access to resources and agricultural technology is another challenge. Many female farmers in Rokan Hulu still rely on traditional methods in their farming due to limited access to modern technology and adequate agricultural education. This can limit their productivity and extend the time they spend in the fields, leaving little time for family. The issues faced by female farmers in Rokan Hulu lead to conflicts

arising from the unbalanced dual roles between work and family (Work-Family Conflict) (Isa & Indrayati, 2023). This is because the demands of fulfilling obligations as a mother and as a worker must be addressed simultaneously (T. Elfira Rahmayati, 2021; Vernia & Senen, 2022). The existence of Work-Family Conflict can reduce women's productivity in their work (Akkas et al., 2015). The urgency of this research is the desire to achieve Work-Family Balance in the families of female farmers, which is hindered by the unavoidable Work-Family Conflict faced by female farmers in Rokan Hulu. Therefore, female farmers in Rokan Hulu Regency need to understand why, as women who have become housewives, they also work as farmers. By realizing this reason, when conflicts arise, women will not easily become discouraged. Additionally, female farmers in Rokan Hulu can also reflect on the Work-Life Conflict that occurs while being housewives and farmers. Thus, female farmers in Rokan Hulu Regency can identify strategies to address the issues of Work-Life Conflict as housewives and farmers. Consequently, female farmers in Rokan Hulu can improve agricultural productivity while still maintaining a balance with family life. Based on this description, the research problem formulation is as follows: Strategies of Female Farmers in Balancing Roles as Farmers and Housewives. What are the underlying reasons for taking on the roles of housewives and working as farmers?

Literature Review

Gender Roles in Agriculture

Gender plays a crucial role in determining the division of labor, access to resources, and decision-making within agricultural households. Women in agriculture often manage both domestic and agricultural tasks, such as planting, harvesting, and processing crops, while men tend to handle activities considered more physically demanding, such as land preparation and transporting harvests (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006). Access to agricultural resources such as land, credit, fertilizers, and training still shows gender disparities. In many societies, women have limited land rights due to patriarchal customary systems or inheritance laws, which restrict their independence in managing agriculture (Doss, 2002). In the agricultural value chain, women are generally involved in downstream activities such as post-harvest processing and marketing, while men dominate distribution and decision-making. This situation is further exacerbated by women's limited access to formal education and agricultural training, which impacts their productivity and innovation (Quisumbing et al., 2014).

Role Theory

Role Theory explains how individuals manage multiple social roles simultaneously. Female farmers often bear the responsibilities of being housewives, agricultural workers, and community members. These roles create challenges when the demands of one role interfere with the effectiveness of another (Biddle, 1986). Role conflict arises when work in the fields clashes with obligations to care for children or manage the household. In such situations, women make various adjustments to balance these roles, such as through time management, task sharing within the household, or reducing the intensity of fieldwork (Goode, 1960). This theory is highly relevant in analyzing how female farmers in rural areas like Rokan Hulu face socio-economic pressures and layered gender expectations.

Work-Life Balance Concept

Work-life balance is a condition in which individuals can allocate their time and energy proportionally between work and family life. In the context of female farmers, achieving this balance is challenging because they face pressures from both domains: agricultural production and household management (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). This balance depends not only on the individual but also on social structures such as the division of labor within families, community support, and cultural roles. Imbalances often lead to emotional exhaustion, stress, and ultimately a decline in productivity and quality of life for female farmers (Frone, 2003). Strategies to achieve work-life balance include more efficient time management, role negotiation with partners, and

building support systems that allow women to remain active in the agricultural sector without sacrificing family functions.

Gender-Sensitive Agroecology Approach

Agroecology is not only about environmentally friendly cultivation techniques but also emphasizes social aspects and gender justice. A gender-sensitive agroecology approach recognizes the specific roles and needs of women in agricultural systems and encourages their active involvement in all stages of production and decision-making (FAO, 2018). Women play a crucial role in conserving local seeds, managing small plots of land, and innovating household agriculture. Unfortunately, conventional agricultural systems tend to overlook these contributions. Therefore, the agroecology approach emphasizes the importance of women's access to training, technology, and leadership in farmer organizations (Bezner Kerr, 2012).

By integrating gender sensitivity into agricultural policies and agroecology programs, a more comprehensive balance between productivity, sustainability, and social justice can be achieved.

Social-Economic Adjustment Strategies by Female Farmers

Female farmers develop various social and economic adjustment strategies to respond to the dual workload and limited access. The first strategy is flexible time management, such as alternating between fieldwork and household tasks to ensure both can proceed (Fischer & Qaim, 2012). The second strategy is income diversification. Many women develop micro-enterprises, such as selling food, handicrafts, or trading agricultural products independently. This helps maintain household economic stability, especially when agricultural yields are insufficient (Arora, 2019). Third, women utilize social networks such as women's farmer groups or local cooperatives as a means to exchange knowledge, production tools, and expand market access. Fourth, they also negotiate within the household, for example with husbands or children, to share domestic workloads so they can focus more on agricultural production (Yadav & Lal, 2018). These strategies are forms of adaptation that not only reflect individual resilience but also highlight the importance of structural transformation in sustainably supporting the empowerment of female farmers.

Research Methods

The research conducted by the author employs a qualitative method. This is intended to obtain more detailed data regarding the research problems. The primary data source in this study is based on primary data collected through interviews with 16 female farmers residing in Rambah District. The selection of 16 individuals was made because Rambah District consists of 13 villages and 1 sub-district, with 2 additional informants included to strengthen the research findings. The criteria for the research respondents are farmers who are married and have at least one child.

Data analysis uses a thematic approach, focusing on the dimensions and factors of work-life balance that are relevant to the research questions or provide a comprehensive description of all the data. The reliability of the data is ensured through rechecking verbatim transcripts, verifying the accuracy of the transcriptions and consistency in the coding process, as well as examining the relationships between the interview results (T. Elfira Rahmayati, 2021).

Results and Discussion

The following is a summary of interview findings presented in Table 1, which outlines the key themes from 16 female farmers regarding their reasons for working, the forms of work-family conflict they experience, and their coping strategies.

Figure 4.1. Challenges and Solutions for Female Farmers

Respondent No.	Reasons for Working as a Farmer & Housewife	Forms of Work-Family Conflict	Strategies to Overcome Conflict
1	Economic needs, husband is a daily laborer	Not enough time to care for children	Wake up earlier, divide daily time
2	Used to farming since childhood	No time to accompany children in learning	Prioritize family time in the evening
3	Farming is the main skill	Physical fatigue, lack of focus on household tasks	Share tasks with husband
4	Dual income for children's education	Emotional pressure when children are sick	Use simple tools in the fields
5	Farming for family economic sustainability	Cannot help children with school assignments	Involve children in light tasks
6	Farming forms a core part of my identity	Household responsibilities neglected	Strict time management
7	Family-owned land, cannot be left	Time conflict during harvest	Group work, mutual assistance among farmers
8	No other choice but to farm	Less time with family	Create daily and monthly schedules
9	Farming and taking care of children because husband is out of town	Children at home without supervision	Set fixed times for household tasks
10	Left by husband, must farm alone	Emotional stress, heavy workload	Coordinate with neighbors to swap work schedules
11	Family inheritance, must be continued	Difficult to rest, fatigue	Reduce working hours when children need attention
12	To meet daily needs	Not present at children's school activities	Regular communication with children's teachers
13	Farming and being a housewife as a duty	Difficult to breastfeed while working in the fields	Bring children to the fields when possible
14	The farm is the only source of income	Cannot take children to school	Ask for help from close family
15	Children are grown, still farming for independence	Difficult to control time during harvest	Create weekly priority scales
16	Encouragement from family to continue farming	Family time is cut short	Schedule field activities only in the morning

Source of data from interviews (2025)

Based on Table 4.1, it can be stated that female farmers in Rokan Hulu play dual roles as breadwinners and household managers, motivated by economic needs, family traditions, and personal identity. They face significant work-family conflicts, employing strategies such as time management and social support to cope; however, many still struggle with unresolved domestic responsibilities, highlighting the need for structural changes in support systems.

In the context of agrarian societies like Rokan Hulu Regency, women play a dual role that is not easy: as breadwinners and household managers. Interviews with 16 female farmers revealed that their primary motivation to continue farming is not only driven by economic factors but also by social values, family traditions, and personal identity.

Most respondents mentioned reasons such as "dual income for children's education" (R4), "family inheritance that must be continued" (R11), and "farming as a part of self-identity" (R6). These findings align with Lastarria-Cornhiel's (2006) observations, which state that in rural societies, women often serve as guardians of agricultural heritage and farming culture, with a strong attachment to the land.

However, active involvement in farming also creates pressure. Most respondents admitted to facing work-family conflict, which can be categorized into three main forms: time conflict, role conflict, and emotional conflict. For example, respondent R1 stated, "there is not enough time to take care of the children," while R10 expressed, "the heavy workload triggers emotional stress."

This is consistent with the theory of Greenhaus & Beutell (1985), which posits that conflict arises when the demands of work and family roles cannot be met simultaneously.

In facing these conflicts, female farmers demonstrated various adaptation strategies. The most common strategy is time management, such as creating daily schedules (R8), sharing tasks with their husbands (R3), or prioritizing family time in the evening (R2). These strategies reflect what is known as role negotiation, which is the effort to rearrange responsibilities for a more balanced approach (Goode, 1960).

Other strategies include utilizing social support, such as group work among farmers (R7) and coordination with neighbors (R10). A study by Fischer & Qaim (2012) in the context of Kenyan agriculture shows that social support plays a crucial role in enhancing work efficiency and strengthening the social resilience of female farmers.

One interesting form of adjustment is the flexibility in maternal roles, such as bringing children to the fields (R13) or setting specific times for household chores (R9). This indicates that female farmers are not only trying to divide their time but also integrate domestic and productive roles, as explained in the study by Quisumbing et al. (2014) on the integration of gender roles in agriculture.

Furthermore, some respondents developed efficiency-based strategies and task prioritization, such as using simple tools in the fields (R4) or creating weekly priority scales (R15). These strategies reflect a form of coping mechanism (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which is the ability to adjust to life pressures with realistic and sustainable solutions.

Nevertheless, not all conflicts are fully resolved. Some farmers (e.g., R5 and R6) still feel burdened by neglected household responsibilities. This indicates that structural transformation in the division of domestic labor and social support systems is still very much needed. According to Doss (2002), inequalities in access to training, education, and resources exacerbate the burden of dual roles for women in the agrarian sector.

Implication and Conclusion

This research reveals that female farmers in Rokan Hulu Regency play dual roles as breadwinners and household managers due to economic demands and socio-cultural norms that still place women within a domestic framework. These findings reinforce theoretical studies on role conflict and expand the understanding of women's work realities in the context of traditional agriculture in Indonesia.

The theoretical implications of this study emphasize the relevance of Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960) and update it within the contemporary context of rural Indonesia by adding local perspectives and gender-specific dynamics in the agricultural sector. This study also supports agrarian feminist thought, which highlights that women's contributions to agricultural production are often obscured by the dominance of masculine narratives.

Practically, the results of this research indicate that agricultural development policies and women's empowerment need to be aligned with field realities. Government interventions, such as time management training, the provision of childcare facilities in villages, and community-based psychosocial support, can be relevant strategies to reduce the burden of dual work and improve the quality of life for female farmers.

Furthermore, the importance of strengthening social networks and family support has proven to be a crucial pillar for women in coping with role conflicts. Therefore, programs aimed at enhancing women's capacity should be designed not only for individuals but also to involve the community collectively.

In conclusion, the dual roles undertaken by female farmers not only reflect their resilience in facing social and economic pressures but also highlight the need for more equitable structural

transformation. Recognizing women's work, both in the public and domestic spheres, is a crucial first step toward achieving greater social justice in rural Indonesia.

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