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Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, MALAYSIA



**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 16TH REGIONAL
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SIMPORA XVI: 2025**

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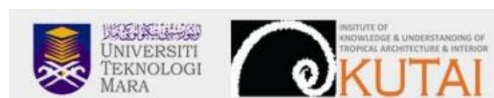
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EXPLORING WOMEN'S AGRICULTURAL ROLE TRANSFORMATION AMIDST MALE MIGRATION IN THE TRADITIONAL CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SIMPANG MAMPLAM SUB-DISTRICT

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Abstract: This study examines the transformation of women's roles in the agricultural sector as an adaptive response to male migration in Simpang Mamplam Subdistrict, Aceh, within the context of a deeply rooted traditional culture. Employing an exploratory qualitative approach, data were collected from 40 farming households using a mixed-format questionnaire comprising both closed-ended questions, which provided simple and structured quantitative insights, and open-ended questions, which captured nuanced perspectives and lived experiences. The findings reveal that the outmigration of men, particularly household heads have compelled women to assume primary responsibilities in agricultural management, including land preparation, planting, and strategic decision-making. However, these changes remain constrained by entrenched gender norms upheld through customary institutions and practices such as *Keujruen Blang*, *Khanduri Blang*, and *Tabu Bijeh*. Women also bear a double workload, balancing agricultural labor with domestic duties, while facing limited access to land, technology, training, and institutional support. Although some have demonstrated increased capacity and economic participation, such developments have yet to dismantle the gender-hierarchical power structures and cultural frameworks that continue to define the gendered division of labor.

Keywords: male_migration, women, agriculture, traditional_culture

INTRODUCTION

In Acehese society, particularly in rural areas such as Simpang Mamplam Subdistrict, agriculture is more than an economic activity; it forms an integral part of a deeply rooted cultural system passed down through generations. The agrarian system in Aceh is grounded in values of mutual cooperation, social solidarity, and strong customary norms. This system, known as "adat budaya sawah" (customary rice farming culture), encompasses a series of ritual and communal stages, including *peuphon meugo* (commencement of the planting season), *keujreung blang* (customary agricultural institution), *tabu bijeh* (nursery preparation), *meu ue* (plowing), and *khanduri blang* (ritual feast marking the return to the

fields). These practices demonstrate how agriculture in Aceh is embedded within the collective life of the community, functioning not merely as food production but as a cultural institution (Attas & Anoeграjekti, 2021; Dewi & Julianita, 2021; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Mardhiah et al., 2024; Thaifuri & Gadeng, 2024).

Within this traditional cultural framework, men have historically occupied dominant roles in the agrarian public sphere, while women have been relegated to domestic and supportive roles, although their participation in agricultural labor has never entirely ceased (International Organization for Migration, 2020; Kausar et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). In Aceh, youth migration is driven not only by economic motives but also by the structural decline of the agricultural sector, which is increasingly perceived by younger generations as lacking promise (Sufriadi, 2017; Zhao et al., 2024). Many young people have abandoned rice fields and farmland, the spaces where their ancestors cultivated communal livelihoods, in favor of occupations offering higher financial returns (Ghebru et al., 2018; Proctor & Lucchesi, 2012; Salau et al., 2020). A substantial portion of current Acehnese migrants in Malaysia were formerly farmers or the children of farmers (Wu, 2006).

This dynamic presents a significant dilemma: as villages lose their productive labor force, the agricultural system becomes increasingly fragile, with no generational renewal. At the same time, weak policy support and limited access to agricultural financing further marginalize the sector, widening the gap between youth aspirations and the realities of the rural labor market (FAO et al., 2024; OECD, 2018; Zhao et al., 2024). According to 2024 data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik Bireuen, 2025), Simpang Mamplam, covering 157.81 km² with a population of 28,562 is among the most densely populated subdistricts in the region. Agriculture has remained a primary source of household income over the last five years, with 3,180 households managing irrigated rice fields, 720 cultivating secondary crops, 35 managing upland rice, and 376 engaged in horticulture. In recent years, women have been at the forefront of agricultural activities, from land preparation to crop marketing. Research by Hadi & Wahyuni (2024) reveals a pattern of permanent youth migration, particularly among married individuals in their first two decades of marriage, most often to Malaysia. Consequently, farming in the subdistrict is increasingly undertaken by women due to the outmigration of young men. Yet, despite their growing responsibilities, this shift does not necessarily result in greater recognition or equal status.

This trend underscores a broader generational disengagement from traditional agriculture (Mussa, 2019), especially among those with secondary or higher education (Hadi & Wahyuni, 2024). It has also given rise to a new phenomenon in rural Acehnese life: shifting gender roles. As men migrate, women, once in supporting positions, now assume central responsibilities within the farming system. In Simpang Mamplam, for instance, women increasingly perform tasks historically dominated by men, such as plowing, planting, and harvesting rice. However, their increased participation in physical labor has not been matched by greater social recognition. In the *tabu bijeh* stage, women remain the primary actors in rice planting (Alfian et al., 1977; Hariadi et al., 2020; Rachmatsyah et al., 2023), yet it is still deemed inappropriate for women to lead or make strategic agricultural decisions. Similarly, in the *khanduri blang*

tradition which consists of three main rituals (*Khanduri Tron U Paya*, marking the start of planting; *Khanduri Apam*, held after planting or when crops sprout; and *Khanduri Bu/Khanduri Bungoeng Padee*, held when rice nears maturity), women are expected to prepare food, particularly lighter dishes, while heavier tasks and decision-making remain male-dominated (Attas & Anoegrajekti, 2021; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Thaifuri & Gadeng, 2024).

These patterns reveal that gender role transformations in Aceh's agricultural sector are asymmetrical: practices are shifting out of necessity, yet cultural norms and values remain largely unchanged. Therefore, any examination of women's roles in traditional Acehese agriculture must be situated within its complex cultural context. Changes in role distribution are not merely about labor allocation; they are deeply intertwined with embedded value systems. In regions such as Simpang Mamplam where custom, religion, and social structure form the foundation of community life transformations in gender and agricultural roles must be understood within the framework of a living culture. Against this backdrop, it becomes essential to investigate how local culture continues to define and constrain women's roles in agriculture, particularly amid male outmigration that has reshaped the rural labor structure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Theory of Cultural Practice (Bourdieu, 1977) emphasizes that individual actions are shaped by habitus, a framework of values and dispositions ingrained through social experience as well as by the field, the social arena in which individuals interact and compete within existing norms and power structures (Adib, 2012; Daniel, 2022; Nurnazmi & Kholifah, 2023). Within this framework, traditional agriculture becomes a cultural field governed by customary norms and established gender relations, wherein men and women occupy historically constructed social positions (Alfian et al., 1977; Aridawati, 2020; Hasbullah, 2020). When male migration occurs, women do step in to fill the labor gap in the agricultural sector; however, their roles remain negotiated within the boundaries of these cultural structures. Building on this, the present study also draws on the push-pull theory in migration studies (Lee, 1966), which explains that migration results from push factors in the place of origin such as poverty, limited job opportunities, and structural pressures in agriculture and pull factors in the destination areas, such as the availability of non-agricultural employment offering higher wages (De Haas, 2010).

The recent transformation in rural labor structures directly impacts social dynamics in rural areas, particularly in the distribution of gender roles. In this regard, Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) is relevant, as it argues that gender roles are shaped by socially constructed expectations attached to specific sexes, rather than purely biological factors (Fitriani et al., 2022). Nonetheless, earlier studies tend to position women merely as complements or substitutes for male labor, without analyzing how cultural structures such as customary norms and power relations constrain women's access to and control over agrarian resources. Understanding these dynamics provides the foundation for a broader paradigm shift in gender analysis within agriculture, as reflected in the development of Gender and Development (GAD) Theory.

A paradigm shift is emerging through the development of GAD Theory, which not only focuses on women's participation in development but also highlights the structural inequalities and power relations that perpetuate women's subordination. In rural farming systems, GAD provides a framework to understand that the increasing involvement of women often referred to as the feminization of agriculture does not automatically translate to enhanced control or improved welfare for women (Haque, 2020). On the contrary, while their workload increases, their rights to decision-making, land ownership, and social recognition remain limited. In addition, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) views migration not solely as an individual decision but as a household strategy to manage economic risk and market uncertainty (Mannan & Frederic, 2015). However, this approach has yet to fully consider how cultural norms and gender structures within households influence the post-migration division of roles, particularly affecting women who remain in the villages and take over agricultural responsibilities.

Previous research on women's roles in agriculture tends to focus on quantitative aspects or economic contributions, with limited attention to local cultural dynamics that shape these roles. For instance, studies by Mardiyah et al., (2024); and Shamadiyah & Nasution, (2018) have examined women's contributions to national agriculture in Aceh but have yet to specifically explore the local Acehnese context, which is characterized by strong customary systems and collective agrarian traditions. In communities like Simpang Mamplam, agriculture is not merely about production but is intertwined with cultural rituals and embedded social structures. Some earlier studies have addressed the transformation of women's roles in the agricultural sector, particularly in relation to male migration and local culture. However, few have deeply examined how such changes unfold within traditional cultural frameworks such as those found in Aceh. Research by Rigg & Salamanca (2015) indicates that the feminization of agriculture in Southeast Asia is often "temporary," with women stepping in out of necessity rather than structural recognition of their capacities (Yani & Indrayani, 2021). Furthermore, despite rural occupational diversification, women often remain in subordinate positions within culturally rooted agricultural labor structures (Rahman & Istriyani, 2024; Wola et al., 2023). Nationally, women contribute significantly to agricultural production, yet their roles are rarely reflected in policy and development planning (Jullimursyida et al., 2021; Yuwono, 2013).

Additionally, several studies have shown that women are key actors in agricultural production, yet their identities as "farmers" are frequently unrecognized both administratively and socially (Faizien, 2025; Mardiyah et al., 2024). A qualitative study by Dian & Bayuardi Galuh, (2024) in Aceh revealed that women involved in agriculture after their husbands' migration remain constrained by customary norms that limit their leadership roles in public spaces. Acehnese agricultural customs such as *tabu bijeh* and *khanduri blang* are historically understood not merely as productive activities but as cultural mechanisms. However, these traditional structures tend to confine women to domestic and consumption-related roles, rather than leadership in agrarian domains. Furthermore, the role of customary systems in preserving gender hierarchies within Aceh's agricultural framework reinforces the fact that women's involvement in physical labor does not necessarily lead to recognition in decision-making processes (Attas & Anoegrajekti, 2021; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Mardiah et al., 2024; Shamadiyah & Nasution, 2018; Thaifuri & Gadeng, 2024)

Therefore, studies on women's roles in Aceh's agricultural sector must take cultural dimensions as a primary variable. Culture not only shapes labor structures and gender relations but also serves as a symbolic instrument that governs who has the right to make decisions, access resources, and be socially recognized. Against the backdrop of sustained male migration, which significantly alters the rural labor landscape by redistributing household and agricultural responsibilities, it becomes crucial to examine how women adapt and renegotiate their roles within a dominant cultural structure that has yet to provide equitable space for gender equality. This perspective opens the way for analyzing women's agency and constraints through both cultural and migration-related theoretical lenses.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the transformation of women's roles in agricultural activities amid the growing trend of male migration, particularly within the traditional cultural setting of Simpang Mamplam Subdistrict. This methodological choice was grounded in the need to uncover layered and complex social realities in which customary values and cultural norms continue to define and regulate gender roles and responsibilities. An exploratory design is particularly suited for examining under-researched phenomena, especially those embedded in enduring value systems such as customary structures (Bambang, 2018; Riswandi et al., 2019) (Bambang, 2018; Riswandi et al., 2019). Following Geertz's (1973) interpretive tradition, the transformation of women's agricultural roles in this context is understood not merely as a functional shift in labor allocation, but as a process of social negotiation deeply embedded in tradition, customary rules, and collective expectations (Indirasari et al., 2019) (Indirasari et al., 2019). This perspective allows the study to capture the interplay between individual agency and structural cultural constraints.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, comprising 40 households that met the criterion of having women who had assumed agricultural roles previously undertaken by their husbands or other male family members. This selection ensured that the sample reflected lived experiences of role substitution under the conditions of male out-migration.

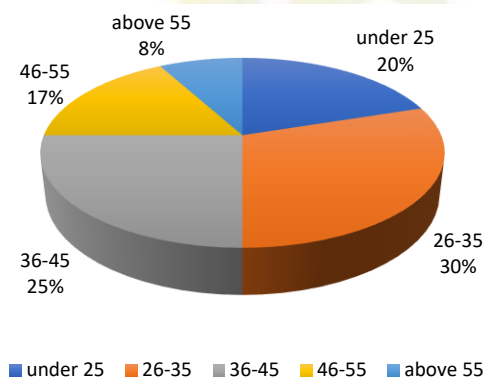
Data collection was carried out through a structured questionnaire specifically designed to elicit both factual information and nuanced personal accounts regarding perceptions, experiences, and role changes. The instrument comprised two types of questions: (1) closed-ended items, used to obtain simple and structured quantitative data on respondent demographics, role distribution, and decision-making patterns; and (2) open-ended items, aimed at exploring participants' deeper insights, lived experiences, and interpretations of their changing roles within the cultural fabric of Simpang Mamplam. Data analysis followed a qualitative thematic approach, enabling the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns, meanings, and perspectives related to the transformation of women's roles in agriculture under traditional cultural constraints. Responses to closed-ended questions were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics to provide a demographic and contextual overview,

as well as to identify emerging patterns in gender roles and community responses to role shifts. These quantitative summaries served as a supporting framework for the narrative analysis derived from the open-ended responses, allowing for a richer and more integrated interpretation of the findings.

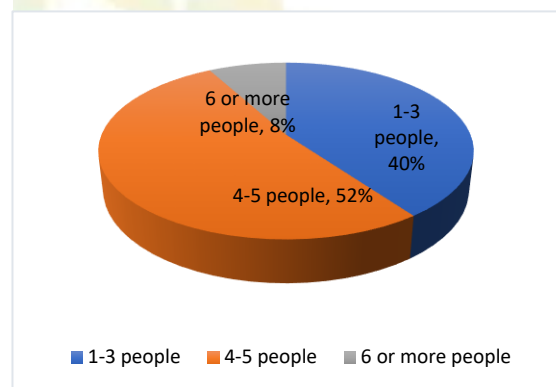
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Characteristics

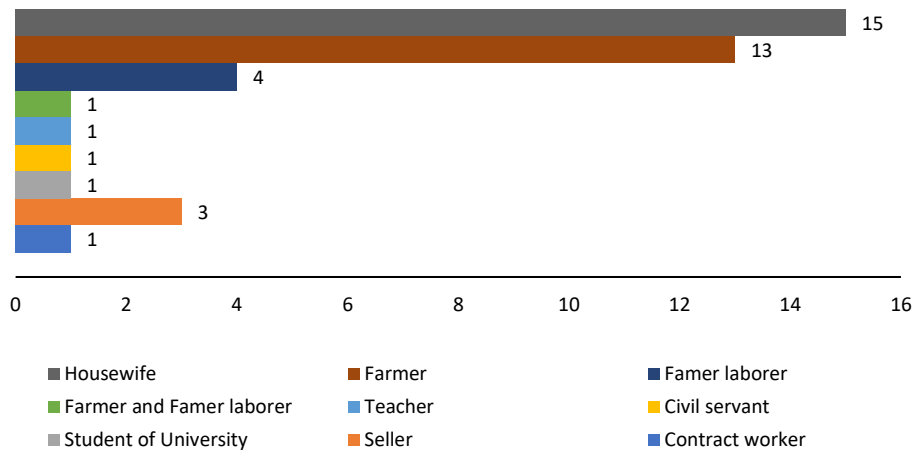
The respondents in this study are women who have assumed household responsibilities in the absence of male family members due to migration. The majority are aged between 26 and 45 years, with 80% being married, 5% unmarried, and 15% widowed. Regarding age distribution, 20% of respondents are under 25 years old, 30% are between 26–35 years, 25% are between 36–45 years, 17% are between 46–55 years, and 8% are over 55 years old. In terms of household size, 40% of respondents live in households with 1–3 members, 52% with 4–6 members, and 8% with more than 6 members. The majority are either farmers or housewives actively engaged in agricultural activities, particularly after their husbands or male family members migrated. The size of paddy fields managed by the respondents varies, though most operate on a small scale (less than 1 hectare). In addition to rice cultivation, some respondents also manage coconut or oil palm plantations as supplementary sources of income.



(a) age



(b) Number of family members



(c) Occupations

Figure 1: Respondent Characteristics

Income from rice farming is predominantly categorized as low (below IDR 5 million), with non-farming income also being relatively insignificant. This indicates a limited and financially vulnerable economic condition among agricultural households, particularly in situations where the male head of the household has migrated, leaving the economic and farming responsibilities to women.

4.2 Gender Roles in Traditional Culture

The division of labor in agricultural activities in Simpang Mamplam Subdistrict remains heavily influenced by gender-based social constructions deeply embedded within the local cultural and value systems. Tasks typically categorized as the male domain include operating heavy machinery such as tractors, plowing the land, and making strategic decisions regarding the selection of fertilizers, pesticides, and marketing strategies for agricultural products. This division of labor reflects a gendered hierarchy in which men are positioned as the primary actors in tasks considered physically demanding and economically significant, while women are often confined to supportive roles deemed domestic or secondary, such as planting, crop maintenance, and household financial management.

Within the Acehnese cultural framework, this division is reinforced by customary institutions such as *Keujruen Blang* (traditional agricultural leaders), as well as agrarian social practices like *Meugoe* (farming) and *Meuseuraya* (mutual labor assistance in agriculture). Men generally hold central roles in these activities, both symbolically and practically. In contrast, women are typically involved in lighter tasks such as *Tabu Bijeh* (seed nursery preparation) or in supporting ritual activities like *Khanduri Blang* (rice field feast), where their contributions are mainly focused on providing food or logistical support.

Respondents' reactions to deviations from these traditional norms reveal a complex cultural dynamic. Some respondents reported that women have begun to take on agricultural roles

that are traditionally regarded as male responsibilities. The findings also indicate a shift in values, as several respondents no longer view women's involvement in these roles as transgressive, but rather as a form of adaptation to meet household economic needs.



Figure 2: *Tabu Bijeh* (source: Kompas, 2023)

Furthermore, women have begun to participate in strategic decision-making processes related to cropping patterns, post-harvest management, and the organization of production cycles. However, this participation remains limited, as it typically requires approval from husbands or male relatives. This phenomenon illustrates that, despite an increase in women's involvement, full control over the agricultural sector has not yet shifted into their hands and continues to operate within a patriarchal structure institutionalized through customary norms.

Limited access to agrarian resources represents another significant structural barrier. The majority of women do not possess land certificates in their own names. Land ownership is generally acquired through inheritance or with the consent of husbands, ultimately restricting women's autonomy in making economic and agrarian decisions. This condition also affects their access to agricultural services such as technical training, credit facilities, or government assistance programs, which often require formal proof of land ownership.



Figure 3: *Khanduri Blang* (source: Nusantara News, 2021)

4.3 Traditional Agricultural Rituals

Traditional agricultural rituals, such as prayers before planting and *Khanduri Blang* after harvest, continue to be practiced, although with decreasing frequency. Women's participation in these rituals tends to be supportive in nature, typically involving food preparation, while ceremonial roles and decision-making processes remain predominantly male-dominated. This highlights that although women are becoming increasingly active in the practical aspects of agriculture, their symbolic and institutional space continues to be restricted by conservative cultural constructions.

4.4 Impact of Male Migration

Most households in Simpang Mamplam Subdistrict have experienced male migration, particularly of husbands, to other regions. These migrations are typically medium to long term in nature lasting more than six months and are primarily directed toward major cities within and outside the province. The main drivers of migration include limited local employment opportunities and economic pressures at the household level, prompting men to seek permanent jobs or supplementary income. In this context, migration serves as a survival strategy for smallholder farming families facing economic uncertainty.

One of the most direct consequences of this migration is a significant shift in household labor structure, particularly in the gender-based division of labor. Women, who previously played a secondary role in agricultural support tasks, are now assuming full responsibility for paddy field management including planting, maintenance, harvesting, and marketing. Women's active roles are also increasingly visible in their participation in farmer groups or village-level agricultural forums. However, despite this rise in participation, a portion of women remains excluded from such groups due to structural barriers, such as time constraints, heavy domestic responsibilities, or cultural limitations that continue to resist female leadership in public agricultural spaces.

On the other hand, this role shift has not been entirely positive. Many women report experiencing a double burden, as they must simultaneously manage farming activities, household duties, childcare, and elderly care without the support of their migrant husbands. This situation heightens both physical and psychological stress, increasing vulnerability to exhaustion and mental strain.

Economically, remittances from migrant husbands are not always consistent or sufficient. Some respondents reported receiving no remittances at all. In cases where remittances were received, their use varied widely ranging from financing agricultural needs such as seeds and fertilizers, meeting daily household expenses, to serving as capital for small-scale side businesses.

This situation reflects the complex impact of male migration on household structure and women's well-being. While women's responsibilities increase significantly, this does not necessarily translate into improved access to resources or formal recognition of their roles in the agricultural sector and family economy.

4.5 Women's Workload and Adaptation

The large-scale male migration in Simpang Mamplam Subdistrict has led to a significant transformation in the labor structure of agricultural households, with women now emerging as the primary actors in agrarian production. The majority of respondents reported working in the rice fields for more than eight hours per day, while simultaneously bearing domestic responsibilities such as managing the household, caring for children, and running side businesses like small-scale trading or livestock farming. This high workload not only illustrates the increased involvement of women in the productive economy but also underscores the double burden they bear amid limited social and structural support.

The main challenges faced by women in managing agricultural land independently include limited physical strength, lack of access to appropriate agricultural technology, and the absence of institutional support such as active farmer groups or consistent government intervention. Although some respondents mentioned receiving assistance from family members, the community, or government programs, the scope and form of such support remain highly limited. Agricultural training, access to farming credit, and lightweight farming technologies are among the top priorities identified to help women perform their agrarian functions more effectively and sustainably.

In terms of outcomes and income, the impacts of male migration vary. Some women acknowledged a decline in harvest yields due to the absence of male labor, which traditionally handled physically demanding tasks such as plowing and large-scale harvesting. However, other respondents reported stable or even improved yields, as women had acquired planting skills and technical knowledge over time.

Traditionally, women's roles in agriculture have been restricted by customary norms, especially in decision-making processes governed by institutions such as *Keujruen Blang*, and communal labor systems like *Meuseuraya*, both of which have been predominantly male-dominated. Tasks requiring patience, such as *tabu bijeh* (seed nursery preparation), are typically delegated to women. Therefore, the increasing involvement of women in both production and decision-making roles within the agricultural sector reflects an ongoing process of social and cultural negotiation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the phenomenon of male migration from agricultural households in Simpang Mamplam Subdistrict has triggered a significant transformation in women's roles within the agricultural sector. Women have not only taken over physical labor in the fields but have also begun participating in decision-making processes, although still within a patriarchal framework that is culturally institutionalized. The gender-based division of labor remains firmly embedded, reinforced by customary norms and traditional structures such as *Keujruen Blang*, *Meugoe*, *Meuseuraya*, and agrarian rituals like *Khanduri Blang* and *Tabu Bijeh*, all of which position men at the center of authority.

However, economic pressures resulting from male migration have compelled a shift in values, with women increasingly occupying productive spaces previously regarded as the male domain. Nevertheless, the double burden borne by women, managing both agricultural work and domestic responsibilities along with limited access to resources (land, technology, training, and credit), suggests that this transformation has not yet been accompanied by adequate structural support. In fact, some women still face social stigma when performing roles that exceed traditional gender boundaries.

Economically, women's contributions have increased, yet household income remains fragile, particularly in cases where remittances from migrant family members are unstable or entirely absent. Local innovations, income diversification, and adaptive strategies in the face of constraints have become essential tools for women to sustain their households. Thus, the transformation of women's roles in agriculture, driven by male out-migration, is a social reality that demands recognition and policy support. Building women's capacities, expanding their access to resources, and reconfiguring cultural norms toward greater gender equality are vital to achieving gender-just and sustainable agricultural development in rural Aceh.

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