
GENDER NEGOTIATION IN THE BEKELEWANG TRADITION: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PERNEK, SUMBAWA

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Abstract: Bekelewang is a communal cooking tradition in Sumbawa that places women at the center of preparing and organizing ceremonial events. Although commonly regarded as “kitchen work,” this practice carries broader social meaning and reflects the gender dynamics embedded in the community. This study explores how women interpret their involvement in Bekelewang, how gender-based division of labor operates, and how cultural values shape the legitimacy of women's leadership in the communal kitchen. Using a descriptive qualitative case study in Pernek Village, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using thematic techniques. Findings show that women view Bekelewang as an expression of solidarity (*basiru*) and a social obligation that strengthens community ties. Gendered division of labor remains consistent, with women managing the kitchen while men undertake physically demanding tasks. Women's leadership emerges through the role of the *nuang*, who coordinates tasks, ensures food quality, and maintains collective harmony. Cultural norms, such as kinship, prosociality, and the sense of shame associated with not helping, reinforce this leadership, even as patriarchal structures limit women's participation in formal decision-making. Thus, Bekelewang functions not only as a culinary tradition but also as a social arena where women negotiate roles and sustain their community standing.

Keywords: The Role of Women, Communal Leadership, Gender Division of Labor, Sumbawa Culture

Abstrak: Bekelewang adalah tradisi memasak komunal di Sumbawa yang menempatkan perempuan sebagai pusat dalam mempersiapkan dan mengorganisasi acara seremonial. Meskipun sering dianggap sebagai “pekerjaan dapur,” praktik ini memiliki makna sosial yang lebih luas dan mencerminkan dinamika gender yang melekat dalam komunitas. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana perempuan memaknai keterlibatan mereka dalam Bekelewang, bagaimana pembagian kerja berbasis gender dijalankan, serta bagaimana nilai-nilai budaya membentuk legitimasi kepemimpinan perempuan di dapur komunal. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif deskriptif di Desa Pernek, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis dengan teknik tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan memandang Bekelewang sebagai ekspresi solidaritas (*basiru*) sekaligus kewajiban sosial yang memperkuat ikatan komunitas. Pembagian kerja berbasis gender tetap konsisten, di

mana perempuan mengelola dapur sementara laki-laki melakukan pekerjaan fisik yang lebih berat. Kepemimpinan perempuan muncul melalui peran *nuang*, yaitu sosok yang mengoordinasikan tugas, memastikan kualitas makanan, dan menjaga keharmonisan kolektif. Norma budaya seperti kekerabatan, prososialitas, serta rasa malu apabila tidak membantu memperkuat kepemimpinan ini, meskipun struktur patriarkis masih membatasi partisipasi perempuan dalam pengambilan keputusan formal. Dengan demikian, *Bekelewang* berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai tradisi kuliner, tetapi juga sebagai arena sosial di mana perempuan menegosiasikan peran dan mempertahankan posisi mereka dalam komunitas.

Kata Kunci: Peran Perempuan, Kepemimpinan Komunal, Pembagian Kerja Gender, Budaya Sumbawa

INTRODUCTION

The *Bekelewang* tradition in Sumbawa represents a distinctive form of local wisdom that embodies strong values of *basiru* (mutual assistance), communal togetherness, and social solidarity. In practice, *Bekelewang* unfolds through a series of collective cooking activities that engage large groups of women who prepare ingredients, mix *pina basa* (basic seasoning), coordinate workflow, and ensure that meals are served at the proper time. Rasada (2019) notes that the stages of *Bekelewang* including *basemula*, *urun rembuk*, *barajak*, *melala*, and *masak barema* illustrate how women's collective labor extends beyond food preparation to encompass the maintenance of social relationships and community cohesion.

Although women serve as the central driving force of these activities, their contributions are often framed merely as domestic responsibilities deemed inherent to their gender. Comparable patterns are evident in the Javanese Rewang tradition, where, as Winarsih (2023) observes, women fully manage the communal kitchen yet are not socially recognized as leaders. Budiono (2017) similarly argues that women's work in communal kitchens constitutes a form of social labor with public significance, despite being reduced to domestic duties. Further, Lestari et al. (2018) highlight how women in Rewang employ communicative strategies, *unggah-ungguh*, and *empan papan*, demonstrating effective managerial skills in maintaining interpersonal harmony within shared workspaces.

Widyawati and Arrumaisha (2025) show that Rewang sustains patriarchal power structures through gendered divisions of labor that assign women to domestic roles while men perform physical tasks. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other," their study reveals how women are positioned as secondary subjects whose contributions are valued as supportive rather than authoritative. A similar dynamic emerges in *Bekelewang*, where women oversee the entire culinary process but their leadership remains informal and is seldom acknowledged as a form of social authority.

Field observations, however, indicate that the *nuang*, the head of the communal kitchen, plays a crucial managerial role, overseeing task allocation, menu planning, workflow coordination, and balancing ceremonial needs with intra-community relationships. The *Bekelewang* kitchen requires sophisticated skills in communication, coordination, and decision-making. Nevertheless, because this space continues to be perceived as domestic, it is rarely recognized as an alternative public arena in which women exercise leadership.

The need for this study arises from the fact that previous research on *Bekelewang* has largely focused on technical procedures and its social value (Rasada, 2019), while the gendered experiences of women, particularly how they interpret and negotiate their roles remain underexplored. Moreover, findings from studies on Rewang in Java do not fully reflect the experiences of women in West Sumbawa, who navigate a distinct cultural context (Disnia & Yahyar, 2024; Lestari & Setyawan, 2025; Susanti et al., 2024). This study therefore seeks to describe how women carry out their roles within *Bekelewang*, how gendered divisions of labor are formed, and how cultural values shape women's leadership and its recognition within the communal kitchen. By examining these dynamics, the study highlights *Bekelewang* not merely as a communal cooking tradition but as a social space in which women collaborate, make decisions, and reinforce their position within the community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive case study approach to explore how women negotiate their roles and exercise leadership within the Bekelewang tradition in Pernek Village, Sumbawa. The qualitative design was chosen to capture the depth of cultural meanings, social interactions, and gender dynamics that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measures. By focusing on lived experiences, the research aims to highlight how communal cooking practices function as both domestic labor and a social arena for women's agency.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation allowed the researcher to directly engage in the communal kitchen, observing task distribution, communication patterns, and leadership practices. In-depth interviews were conducted with women of different generations, community leaders, and male participants to obtain diverse perspectives on gendered responsibilities and cultural legitimacy. Documentation, including field notes, photographs, and local records, was used to triangulate findings and strengthen validity.

The data analysis process followed thematic techniques, involving reduction, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns. Themes such as solidarity (*basirah*), gendered division of labor, and the role of the *nuang* were identified and connected to broader theoretical frameworks, including feminist theory and gender and power theory. Ethical considerations were maintained by ensuring confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and respecting local cultural norms throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are derived from extensive participant observation and in-depth engagement with women who actively take part in Bekelewang across generations in Pernek Village. By spending time inside the communal kitchen, the researchers observed how tasks were divided, how women interacted and coordinated work, and how leadership emerged

informally through the role of the *nuang* (head cook). Women of different ages contributed in distinct ways: older women handled tasks that required expertise and judgment, such as preparing *pina basa* and determining taste, while younger women supported them through various preparatory tasks.

Insights also came from conversations with men and community leaders, which helped reveal how the community perceives gendered responsibilities and how women's contributions are legitimized through cultural norms. Field notes, photographs, and recorded interviews enriched the understanding of how decisions were made, how work rhythms were maintained, and how social harmony was negotiated in the kitchen space.

Thematic patterns emerged clearly from these observations and interviews: the gendered division of labor, the moral dimensions of participation, the centrality of *nuang* as an informal leader, and the cultural values that reinforce women's authority while simultaneously limiting their role in formal decision-making. These patterns form the core of the findings presented in the following sections.

***Bekelewang* as a Space of Solidarity and Women's Social Identity**

Field findings indicate that for women in Pernek Village, *Bekelewang* is not merely "kitchen work," but a meaningful cultural practice tied to social identity, communal obligation, and recognition within the community. Women understand their involvement as part of *basiru*—the moral value of mutual assistance that forms the backbone of social life in Sumbawa. Through *Bekelewang*, they contribute not only labor but also materials (*panulung* such as rice, noodles, eggs, sugar, and coffee), social support, and emotional presence. As one informant stated, without the participation of women, "it would be impossible for the host family to manage everything on their own." This illustrates the indispensable role of women's collective labor in sustaining communal rituals.

Participation in *Bekelewang* is shaped not purely by willingness but by cultural expectations embedded in the community's moral structure. Women join because it is considered something that "ought to be done," and because

assistance given today is expected to be returned in the future. Their involvement is also influenced by a sense of shame (*malu*) if they do not contribute, reflecting the operation of informal social sanctions. This dynamic mirrors what Afifah (2022) identifies in the Javanese Rewang tradition: prosocial behavior driven by intertwined motives of sincerity, reciprocity, normative pressure, and community surveillance. Similarly, Kudaibergenov et al. (2025) argue that communal rituals maintain participation partly through social norms that reward conformity and discourage withdrawal.

Solidarity within *Bekelewang* emerges through shared work rhythms, where women cook together, exchange stories, negotiate tasks, and solve problems collectively. These processes strengthen interpersonal bonds and reinforce women's sense of belonging. In other regions, such as Java, Rewang serves similar functions—building social cohesion, reaffirming kinship ties, and enhancing collective stability (Muhsinina et al., 2025; Susanti et al., 2024). In Pernek, these communal interactions cultivate a shared identity among women as custodians of social harmony. Through ongoing participation, women reaffirm their place within the social fabric, and the kitchen becomes a space where relationships are renewed and community ties deepened.

From a theoretical standpoint, this communal dynamic can be understood through Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. In the liminal space of the communal kitchen, everyday hierarchies fade, and women participate as equals, regardless of age, social status, or economic background. The intensity of cooperative labor fosters *communitas*, a temporary sense of solidarity and unity that transcends ordinary social distinctions. Although this equality may be temporary, it creates a context in which women's collective identity and emotional labor are central to the community's functioning. In this sense, *Bekelewang* operates as both a ritual and a social performance that reaffirms collective values.

Connell's (1987) gender and power theory further illuminates how this dynamic operates. While patriarchal structures continue to privilege men in formal decision-making, women exercise relational, emotional, and symbolic

power in the communal kitchen, shaping the success of the ritual. Their leadership, embodied particularly in the role of the *nuang*, demonstrates competence in organizing labor, managing conflict, and ensuring quality. Yet, because this leadership is situated within a domain labeled “domestic,” it remains culturally invisible as a form of public authority. This tension reveals the dual nature of *Bekelewang*: it upholds traditional gender roles while simultaneously providing a space for women’s agency and influence.

In this sense, *Bekelewang* illustrates a complex interplay between structure and agency, conformity and negotiation. While gender norms are reproduced through the habitual assignment of tasks, women also carve out leadership roles and cultivate social legitimacy through participation. The communal kitchen becomes a site where women’s identities are shaped and affirmed, and where social cohesion is continuously produced. Thus, *Bekelewang* stands not only as a communal culinary tradition but as a meaningful sociocultural arena in which women’s labor, competence, and solidarity sustain both ceremonial events and the broader community.

Gendered Division of Labor and Women’s Leadership Space

The findings reveal that the division of labor in *Bekelewang* is distinctly gendered, even though these divisions are never formally articulated in community rules. Men routinely undertake physically demanding tasks such as collecting firewood, slaughtering animals, erecting tents, and cutting meat, while women are responsible for the core culinary processes, preparing *pina basa*, cutting vegetables, adjusting taste, cooking main dishes, and preparing traditional snacks. These responsibilities are accepted as natural extensions of gender norms and are reinforced through cultural habitus that positions kitchen work as inherently feminine, even when it involves complex skills and intensive coordination.

Within this gendered structure, the role of the *nuang* (head of the kitchen) stands out as the central site of women’s leadership. The *nuang* is entrusted with making strategic decisions regarding portions, timing, workflow, and ingredient use, and her judgment is considered authoritative. Informants

repeatedly emphasized that “all cooking-related decisions must be known by the *nuang*,” indicating that she possesses both technical expertise and moral legitimacy. Her authority is not formalized through titles or institutional roles, but is gained through years of experience, accumulated trust, and the recognition of her ability to coordinate large-scale collective labor.

This pattern resonates with research on the Javanese Rewang tradition (Budiono, 2017; Winarsih, 2023; Zaidan, 2024), where women likewise manage communal kitchens yet remain socially framed as performing routine domestic work. In these settings, women’s leadership does not take the form of overt command; instead, it operates through subtle mechanisms such as politeness strategies, situational awareness, and relational communication, as noted by Lestari et al. (2018). The *nuang* embodies this “quiet authority,” managing conflicts, maintaining harmony, and guiding others through soft influence rather than explicit assertion of power.

Viewed through Das and Mishra’s (2021) analysis of food and gender dynamics, the division of labor in *Bekelewang* illustrates how cultural habitus shapes expectations about what men and women “should” do, while simultaneously allowing women to claim authority within the kitchen. Competence, not hierarchy, becomes the basis for leadership. Thus, even though the kitchen is traditionally classified as a domestic sphere, women convert it into a domain of production, coordination, and decision-making. Their ability to direct men in certain tasks, such as the timing of meat preparation or firewood supply, demonstrates that women wield real influence within the communal work setting.

Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of *cultural capital* deepens this understanding. The skills, intuition, and tacit knowledge accumulated by women over time constitute valuable forms of capital that grant them authority in ritual contexts. The kitchen becomes a social field where women mobilize these forms of capital to structure workflow, set standards for quality, and sustain collective efficiency. Their leadership is recognized by the community not as an exception to gender norms, but as a culturally appropriate expression of

feminine competence, which simultaneously reinforces and subtly reconfigures gender boundaries.

Connell's (1987) gender and power theory further reveals the tension inherent in this dynamic. While patriarchal structures reserve formal decision-making for men—such as decisions about event scale or guest lists, women exercise relational and symbolic power essential to the success of the ritual. Their leadership is indispensable yet remains categorized as “domestic.” This paradox highlights how traditional gender systems can mask women's authority even when they carry out managerial roles crucial to communal life.

Ultimately, the gendered division of labor in *Bekelewang* illustrates a complex interplay between cultural reproduction and gendered agency. Women operate within a framework that assigns them to the kitchen, yet they transform this space into a site of coordination, expertise, and leadership that sustains the ceremonial event. Their authority, though informal, shapes the social rhythms of the community and demonstrates that the kitchen in *Bekelewang* is not merely a domestic realm but a critical organizational arena where women's labor, competence, and influence are most visible.

Local Cultural Values, Prosociality, and the Legitimacy of Women's Leadership

Field findings demonstrate that the *Bekelewang* tradition is deeply rooted in local cultural values such as *basiru* (mutual assistance), kinship, and egalitarianism among community members. Informants emphasized that during *Bekelewang*, “everyone works together regardless of social status,” whether educated or not, long-time residents or newcomers. The communal kitchen becomes a space where social boundaries are temporarily softened, and collective participation is prioritized over individual differences.

From a social-psychological perspective, Afifah (2022) argues that *Rewang* fosters solidarity and social integration through shared labor, intensive interaction, and resource exchange, while simultaneously operating under an implicit system of social control in which individuals feel ashamed if they do not participate. A similar pattern appears in *Bekelewang*: participation is both a

source of pride and a moral expectation, reinforcing the collective ethos of the community (Kudaibergenov et al., 2025).

These cultural values serve as the foundation for legitimizing women's leadership in the communal kitchen. Trust in the *nuang* stems not only from her culinary expertise but also from her perceived moral integrity, reliability, and ability to maintain social harmony. The role of *nuang* thus embodies both technical competence and moral authority, positioning women as central figures in the coordination of communal work.

At the same time, patriarchal structures remain evident. While women manage the workflow, regulate group dynamics, and make key decisions related to food, major ceremonial decisions, such as determining the scale of the event, guest lists, and formal planning are still dominated by men. This reflects the dynamic described by Widyawati & Arrumaisha (2025), in which women in Rewang are positioned as “the Other” in Beauvoir's terms: indispensable to the core activities yet excluded from formal domains of authority.

Overall, the interplay between cultural values, prosociality, and gender norms shapes how women's leadership is recognized and constrained within Bekelewang. Although women's roles are legitimized within the communal kitchen, their formal authority in broader community decision-making remains limited, highlighting the coexistence of empowerment and structural inequality.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that *Bekelewang* is far more than a communal cooking activity; it is a culturally embedded practice through which women sustain social solidarity, negotiate gendered responsibilities, and exercise informal leadership within the community. Although their work is often framed as domestic and therefore taken for granted, women play a central and strategic role in ensuring the success of ceremonial events. Through *basiru*, the value of mutual assistance, women reinforce interpersonal bonds, maintain

community cohesion, and shape their collective identity as key actors in sustaining social harmony.

The gendered division of labor in *Bekelewang* remains deeply rooted in cultural habitus, yet it simultaneously creates space for women to lead. The position of *nuang* illustrates how expertise, experience, and social trust allow women to assume authoritative roles in the communal kitchen, even directing men when necessary. However, the recognition of this leadership remains largely informal, as patriarchal structures continue to limit women's participation in formal spheres of decision-making.

Bekelewang reveals a dual reality: while the tradition reinforces gendered norms, it also provides a meaningful arena for women to collaborate, organize collective labor, and assert their influence within the social life of the community. Understanding this dynamic highlights the importance of acknowledging women's contributions not only in domestic contexts but also as integral to the cultural and social fabric of Sumbawa.

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