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Women's Empowerment Strategy Towards Gender Equality as an Effort to Encourage The Success of The SDGs in The 3T Region

Dewi Ngabito[1*], Rizky Ibrahim[2], Nur Lazimatul Hilma Sholehah[3]
Universitas Ichsan Gorontalo, Indonesia
Email: dewingabito5@gmail.com ; rizkiibrahim5555@gmail.com ; nurlamizatul72@gmail.com

Abstract. Sustainable development in 3T (Disadvantaged, Frontier, Outermost) areas faces multidimensional challenges in realising gender equality. Conceptually, women's empowerment in disadvantaged areas requires a holistic approach that considers geographical, cultural, and structural aspects. In the policy context, various empowerment programmes so far still face obstacles in terms of effectiveness and sustainability. This study aims to analyze women's empowerment strategies in achieving gender equality as an effort to support the success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 3T region. The urgency of this research stems from the fact that women in the 3T region face more complex challenges than those in other regions, including limited access to education, health services, and economic opportunities, which hinder the achievement of gender equality and sustainable development. This study employs a qualitative research method, specifically a case study approach, in North Gorontalo Regency, one of Indonesia's 3T regions. Data collection in this study was carried out through in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis. The results of this study show that inclusive and tailored women's empowerment strategies to local challenges can increase women's access to education, health and economic opportunities and strengthen their participation in decision-making. In addition, the use of digital technology has great potential in accelerating the empowerment process, although there are still infrastructure constraints. A more targeted and sustainable empowerment strategy is needed to promote gender equality and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs in the 3T region.

Keywords: Gender Equality; SDGs; Women's Empowerment; 3T Region

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INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is one of the important issues in efforts to achieve gender equality, especially in supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gender equality is strategic in various sectors, such as poverty alleviation, education improvement, and economic growth (Oky Oktaviani Pane, 2024). The challenges women face in the 3T region (disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost) are more complex than in other areas. This is due to geographical isolation, low access to education and health, and still strong patriarchal norms that hinder women's participation in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. Therefore, a holistic empowerment strategy is needed in the context of the 3T region so that gender equality can be realized and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

Email Correspondence*:
nurlamizatul72@gmail.com

In the theory of women's empowerment put forward by Naila Kabeer (1999), it is explained that empowerment is seen as a multidimensional process that involves women's access to resources, decision-making skills, and the achievement of better results in life. This theory is combined with the intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1989) which emphasizes the importance of considering various forms of oppression experienced by women in terms of gender, class, and geographical location. It is important to ensure that women's empowerment in the 3T region is not only focused on the economic aspect but also includes local social and cultural dynamics (Yaneri & Deswanti, 2021).

Gorontalo Utara Regency, as one of the districts included in the 3T area, is often isolated from the wider economic and social development, deepening the gender gap and hindering women's full potential to contribute to sustainable development. This inequality not only affects women but also affects the social and economic progress of society as a whole (Chotim, 2020). Therefore, the development and implementation of the right strategy for women's empowerment in the 3T region is important to be carried out as one of the keys to success in encouraging the success of the SDGs globally. These efforts are not only important to improve the lives of women in disadvantaged areas but are also essential in realizing a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society.

Research on gender equality as an effort to encourage the success of the SDGs has been carried out extensively. Several relevant studies have highlighted the importance of women's empowerment and its relevance to sustainable development. Anggia & Kristian, (2024) It was found that women's empowerment through access to education and skills training in rural areas of Indonesia has a positive impact on household economic welfare. This shows that women's education in marginalized areas can increase their contribution to decision-making at the household and community levels. The research Widiani & Mahfiana, (2023) reinforces these findings by highlighting the importance of collaboration between the government and society, including universities and NGOs in efforts to achieve gender equality. To minimize gender discrimination, local governments must increase the participation of all parties, equalize the vision and mission between institutions, and provide adequate infrastructure and budget. The research Widiyaningrum, (2020) also emphasizes the importance of women's political participation, especially in regions that face structural and cultural barriers. Women's participation in local politics in rural areas is often hampered by partisan norms and low levels of education. They recommend affirmative policies to increase women's involvement in decision-making. Yahya & Kusumawardani, (2022) Researches women's empowerment in disadvantaged areas through the

strengthening of digital technology. They found that if used optimally, digital technology can open up new economic opportunities for women such as access to global markets through electronic commerce. However, inadequate infrastructure is the main barrier to technology access in the 3T region. Mesayu, (2022), then examined the relationship between women's empowerment and the achievement of the SDGs in the 3T region and found that women's empowerment in the economic, educational, and health sectors is essential to accelerate the achievement of several SDG targets. However, empowerment programs often do not fully consider the local context.

This research then became very important because women in the 3T area are still marginalized in various aspects of life. Women's low access to education, training, and economic resources requires solutions based on local needs. Despite the implementation of various women's empowerment programs, the gender gap in the region remains high. Therefore, this study aims to formulate a more effective, contextual, and sustainable empowerment strategy so that women in the 3T region can play a greater role in development and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. This research more specifically focuses on women's empowerment strategies in the 3T region which are rarely in the spotlight in the context of sustainable development in Indonesia. The research not only identifies the challenges women face but also offers solutions based on local potentials and needs. By linking women's empowerment strategies directly with the achievement of the SDGs, this study provides a comprehensive view of the role of women in sustainable development in marginalized regions. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide strategic recommendations that apply to the government and other stakeholders in increasing gender equality and empowering women in the 3T region as well as accelerating the achievement of the SDGs.

METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to deeply understand women's empowerment strategies in 3T areas. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is able to capture the complexity of gender issues in a unique socio-cultural context, as well as reveal the subjective experiences and perspectives of the actors involved in the empowerment process. This method is considered the most appropriate for analysing the interaction between various factors such as social norms, government policies, and local practices that influence women's empowerment efforts.

The researcher involved several groups of informants who were purposively selected based on certain criteria. The first group is empowerment programme implementers from government agencies and non-government organisations who are directly involved in the design and

implementation of various empowerment initiatives. The second group consists of community leaders and customary leaders who have a deep understanding of local socio-cultural dynamics and their role in decision-making. The third group is women programme beneficiaries from various social and economic backgrounds who have direct experience in participating in various empowerment programmes. The selection of informants was based on consideration of their depth of knowledge about women's empowerment issues in the 3T areas, ability to provide detailed information about practices in the field, and representation of different perspectives. Each group of informants was selected because they can provide unique and complementary perspectives in understanding the phenomenon of women's empowerment holistically.

To analyse the data, this study adopted the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman. The process begins with data collection through various techniques including in-depth interviews, field observations, and document review. The collected data was then reduced by identifying important emerging themes, presented in the form of a coherent analytical narrative, and verified through various techniques to ensure the validity of the findings. The entire analytical process was carried out in a cyclical manner by continuously refining interpretations based on feedback from the field and recent theoretical developments (Harahap, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Gender Equality Challenges in the 3T Region

The challenge of gender equality in the 3T region in Indonesia is a complex issue that is influenced by various structural, social, cultural, and economic factors. The findings of this study are in line with the results of a study by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (2022) in 'Profil Gender dan Anak Indonesia' which shows that the Gender Development Index (HDI) of 3T areas is consistently 15-20% lower than non-3T areas, with the largest disparities in the dimensions of education and economic participation. 3T regions often experience limited access to education, health services, and adequate infrastructure which directly exacerbates gender inequality. Field research by the Team for the Acceleration of Development of Disadvantaged Areas (2023) in 10 3T districts found that 67 per cent of senior secondary schools are more than 10 km away from residential areas with a heavier impact on female education participation due to security considerations and social norms. One of the biggest challenges is the inequality of women's access to resources such as education and employment, which in turn limits women's active participation in decision-making and economic development. UNESCO's (2021) comparative study on women's economic participation in Southeast Asia notes that the 3T region of Indonesia has the lowest ratio of 38% in terms of

business ownership by women well below the regional average of 52%. According to structuralist feminist theory, gender inequality is caused by social and economic structures that marginalize women. In the 3T region, the patriarchal structure that is still very deeply entrenched exacerbates this situation. Sastramidjaja's (2022) ethnographic research in East Nusa Tenggara revealed that 72% of key household decisions are still male-dominated, including in terms of girls' education and allocation of family resources. Women's traditional role as housekeepers is often a barrier to their participation in the public sector. In fact, in many cases, women face not only obstacles from society but also from government policies that are less supportive of their active involvement. Limited infrastructure, such as the lack of women-friendly education and health facilities, exacerbates these disparities, making women more vulnerable to poverty and helplessness.

Structuralist feminist theory provides a perspective that to overcome gender inequality, changes in existing economic, political, and social structures are needed (Dr. Drs. Yanuarius You, 2021). In the 3T region, holistic policy interventions are very important. For example, women's empowerment policies that support access to quality education, economic opportunities, and their role in decision-making are crucial to breaking the cycle of inequality. In addition, a more inclusive approach to 3T regional development planning, which involves a gender perspective in each stage can help create a more equitable environment. However, the challenges faced are not only structural but also cultural. Local culture in some 3T areas still maintains a view that puts women in a subordinate position. This process of cultural change requires a careful and gradual approach involving community leaders and local leaders in an open dialogue on the importance of gender equality as a prerequisite for successful sustainable development. This is in line with the approach of intersectionality in feminist theory where gender issues must be viewed from various perspectives including cultural, economic, and political. On the other hand, the role of technology and innovation in the 3T region can be a catalyst to overcome this gap (Khurun'in & Damayanti, 2023). Better access to digital technology, for example, can open up opportunities for women to engage in the digital economy, access distance education, and get information about their rights. However, this requires government support in providing adequate infrastructure such as reliable internet networks and inclusive technology training for women.

In the context of Gorontalo culture, the existence of the customary council has an important role in determining who is worthy of being a regional leader, including whether a woman can occupy the position. This local culture is one of the crucial elements that affect gender equality in the region. Although the people of Gorontalo are well known for their appreciation of the role of women, especially through the concept of "wilayah lo halo-halo" where women are respected as

guardians of family honor, the reality of gender equality in politics and leadership still faces significant challenges.

The customary council in Gorontalo has the power to provide recommendations and views on the candidacy of a leader which can indirectly affect women's access to become regional leaders. Although there is no prohibition on women from becoming regional heads or regional heads according to modern law, the customary norms held by customary councils are still very influential in the political decision-making process. In some cases, customary councils' preference for men as leaders is often based on the traditional belief that men are better suited to lead because of their role as protectors and heads of families. If associated with structuralist feminist theory, these barriers reflect how social and customary structures still place women in subordinate positions. Although there are women who have managed to break these boundaries and take on leadership roles, they often face resistance from traditional groups that hold fast to patriarchal values. This structure limits women's space in political decision-making even though historically, Gorontalo women have shown strong leadership within the family and community.

To address these challenges, a culturally sensitive approach is needed while still encouraging inclusive change. Dialogue between stakeholders including customary councils, governments, and women's organizations is important to modernize leadership perspectives without leaving the cultural roots of Gorontalo. For example, introducing the concept of gender-inclusive leadership in the customary realm can be an important step in paving the way for women to participate more actively in local government. Furthermore, the implementation of the SDGs principles on gender equality must be adapted to the Gorontalo region. Gender equality does not mean abolishing the traditional role of women in culture, but rather developing these roles to be in line with the social and economic changes that are taking place. Women's empowerment in politics and leadership in Gorontalo, especially in areas that are still strongly influenced by customary councils, requires a deep understanding of cultural dynamics and the strategic role of women in customary structures. Thus, gender equality in Gorontalo cannot be achieved only through formal policy changes but also through cultural transformation involving customary councils as key actors in decision-making. Women's empowerment efforts in the region must be rooted in respect for local traditions while encouraging the expansion of women's role in public life.

Approaches and Strategies for Women's Empowerment in the 3T Region

Women's empowerment in the 3T region requires a holistic approach and strategy that considers social, economic, cultural, and political factors. The 3T region is often faced with

tougher challenges than other regions such as lack of access to education, health services, and economic opportunities. This puts women in the region in a more vulnerable position. Therefore, women's empowerment strategies must be focused on building women's capacity to participate in development and decision-making in their regions. The participation-based approach that is widely advocated by the empowerment theory as proposed by Paulo Fraire in the critical consciousness theory can be a strong foundation for women's empowerment in the 3T region. This theory emphasizes the importance of increasing public awareness, especially among women, about the conditions of injustice they experience and how they can change it (Ikhsan et al., 2024). In the context of the 3T region, women are often in a marginalized position both socially and economically, due to the social structure dominated by patriarchy and limited resources.

Freire's approach emphasizes that women need to be given space to be aware of their place in the oppressive system and through this process of consciousness they can begin to organize themselves to fight for their rights. This strategy can be realized through community-based education, where women are encouraged to share their experiences, learn about their rights, and build critical awareness of the systems that limit their roles. Training programs that combine formal and informal education can be one of the strategies to improve women's literacy both in terms of basic education and knowledge of their economic, political, and social rights. In addition, women's empowerment strategies must also include increasing access to economic resources. Access to capital and entrepreneurial opportunities is very important to lift women from economic dependence. For example, skills training programs that are in line with local potentials such as handicrafts, sustainable agriculture, or the benefits of digital technology for the creative economy can be solutions to increase women's economic independence. Thus, women are not only beneficiaries but also the main actors in economic development. However, this empowerment strategy must also take into account the cultural dynamics that exist in the 3T region, in some cases, the local culture still positions women in traditional roles that limit their space of movement. In Gorontalo, for example, the customary council has a role in determining leadership, including whether a woman can become a regional leader, therefore, women's empowerment must be carried out with a culturally sensitive approach, namely through dialogue with traditional leaders and local communities. By involving indigenous leaders in the empowerment process, this program can run more effectively and be accepted by the local community.

On the other hand, women's empowerment strategies must also include increasing women's participation in political decision-making. Women's involvement in local politics in the 3T region is

still low due to various factors including gender stereotypes and lack of access to political education. Therefore, leadership training programs for women need to be encouraged so that they can participate more actively in the democratic process. Women's involvement in politics is not only important to realize fair representation, but also to ensure that the needs and aspirations of women in the 3T region are accommodated in public policy. To achieve the success of women's empowerment in the 3T region, the strategy must be comprehensive involving cooperation between the government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and local communities. Empowerment programs should be designed taking into account the specific needs of each region and should prioritize the inclusion of women in all sectors of development. Women's empowerment in the 3T region is not only about improving women's quality of life but also about creating a more inclusive and sustainable development where women play a central role in every stage. By adopting a participatory and sustainable approach, women's empowerment in the 3T region can be key to addressing social and economic inequalities while advancing the broader gender equality agenda. This is in line with the findings of the World Bank (2022) in 15 3T districts which proved that participation-based programmes increased women's contribution to village development decision-making by 35%, as well as reinforcing the findings of Bappenas (2021) on the positive correlation between women's involvement and the effectiveness of SDGs programmes (6.7% increase per 10% additional women's participation).

The Role of Gender Equality in Encouraging the Success of the SDGs in the 3T Region

Gender equality plays a central role in achieving the success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in the 3T region which faces more complex development challenges. In the context of the SDGs, the fifth goal that focuses on gender equality is the key to realizing sustainable development. Gender inequality in the region covers a variety of aspects, including women's low access to education, health services, and economic opportunities that slow down progress towards the overall achievement of the SDGs. In structuralist feminist theories that highlight inequality as a product of social structures, women in the 3T region are often faced with systemic barriers. Patriarchal social structures, limited access to resources, and cultural norms that limit women's role in public spaces are some of the factors that reinforce gender inequality (Artawan, 2023). This theory emphasizes that to achieve gender equality, a transformation is needed in the social, economic, and political structures that underlie these injustices. Therefore, without addressing gender inequality, the achievement of other SDG goals such as poverty alleviation (Goal 1), access to quality education (Goal 4), or decent work and economic growth (Goal 8) will be hampered.

The role of gender equality in the success of the SDGs in the 3T region is evident in various dimensions. *First*, gender equality can increase women's access to education, which in turn will strengthen women's role in society. Education is one of the important factors in elevating women's position and giving them the ability to actively participate in economic and social development. In the 3T region where access to education is still limited, women's empowerment through education can pave the way to improve the overall quality of life. *Second*, gender equality contributes to improving public health. Women who have greater access to information and health services will be better able to maintain the health of their families and communities. In this context where access to health services is still a challenge, involving women in health programs and community empowerment is essential. Structuralist feminist theory emphasizes that this equality of access is not only a matter of individual rights but also a structural need to achieve broader well-being. When women get equal health rights, they can also act as agents of change in their communities. *Third*, gender equality can increase women's participation in political and economic decision-making. Women are often not involved in important decision-making processes that impact their lives. This hinders progress towards the broader goals of the SDGs. Such as the 16th goal of peace, justice, and strong institutions. When women are allowed to participate fully in political and economic processes, they can provide a different and innovative perspective in decision-making that contributes to more inclusive and sustainable development.

However, the biggest challenge in encouraging gender equality is the patriarchal culture that is still dominant, including in customary structures. In Gorontalo, for example, the customary council has a significant influence in determining whether a woman can lead the territory. This condition shows that efforts to achieve gender equality in the context of the SDGs must take into account the complex socio-cultural dynamics in this region. A culturally sensitive approach, which involves indigenous leaders in discussions about the importance of women's role in development, can help create more significant and sustainable change. In this case, the SDGs serve as a global framework that encourages reform at the local level. Women's empowerment in the 3T region is not only about meeting global goals but also strengthening the economic, social, and political independence of local communities. Gender awareness is a driver for the success of other SDGs because when women are empowered, they can actively contribute to the development of their communities, reduce poverty, improve health, and encourage quality education for the next generation. Thus, the role of gender equality in driving the success of the SDGs in the 3T region is not only limited to moral and human rights aspects but also a structural need to achieve sustainable development. By removing social, economic, and cultural barriers

that stand in the way of equality, the SDGs can be an effective tool to create a more inclusive and equitable world for women in the most disadvantaged regions. This finding is reinforced by a UNDP study (2023) which showed that women's empowerment in 10 3T districts contributed to: (1) a 22% reduction in family poverty, (2) an 18% increase in girls' school participation, and (3) accelerated achievement of 5 SDGs targets at once (Report 'Gender Equality as SDGs Accelerator'). In addition, the World Bank's longitudinal research (2020-2023) in NTT and Papua proves that every 1% increase in gender equality has an impact on 0.8% growth in GRDP per capita in the 3T region ('The Economic Returns of Gender Equality').

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