



Women as Breadwinners: A Butlerian Feminist Perspective on Female Agricultural Labor

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Abstract: This study explores the phenomenon of eleven women in Besuk Kidul Village, Besuk District, Probolinggo Regency, who have become the primary breadwinners in their families. Among agricultural laborers, this role reversal emerges from men's limited employment opportunities, health constraints, and inability to fulfill household needs. Drawing on Judith Butler's feminist framework, which views gender as performative, fluid, and socially constructed, the study interprets this shift as a form of resistance to traditional gender norms and an affirmation of women's agency within patriarchal structures. Using a qualitative field research design, data were obtained through observation and in-depth interviews and analyzed descriptively with reference to Butlerian concepts of gender performativity, deconstruction of gender fluidity, and female subjectivity. The findings highlight three key aspects of women's dominance: their central role in organizing household labor, their authority in family decision-making—including daily needs, children's education, and health care—and their independent management of household finances through savings and arisan (rotating credit associations). These results demonstrate how women in rural contexts negotiate and redefine gender roles through economic agency.

Keywords: *Power Relations, Gender Performativity, Identity Deconstruction*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji fenomena sebelas perempuan di Desa Besuk Kidul, Kecamatan Besuk, Kabupaten Probolinggo, yang berperan sebagai pencari nafkah utama dalam keluarga mereka. Di kalangan buruh tani, pergeseran peran ini muncul akibat keterbatasan kesempatan kerja bagi laki-laki, kendala kesehatan,

serta ketidakmampuan dalam memenuhi kebutuhan rumah tangga. Dengan menggunakan kerangka feminisme Judith Butler yang memandang gender sebagai sesuatu yang performatif, cair, dan terbentuk melalui konstruksi sosial, penelitian ini menafsirkan fenomena tersebut sebagai bentuk resistensi terhadap norma gender tradisional sekaligus afirmasi terhadap agensi perempuan dalam struktur patriarkal. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif lapangan dengan teknik observasi dan wawancara mendalam, serta dianalisis secara deskriptif berdasarkan tiga konsep Butlerian: performativitas gender, dekonstruksi fluiditas gender, dan subjektivitas perempuan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga aspek dominasi perempuan: peran sentral dalam mengatur pembagian kerja rumah tangga, otoritas dalam pengambilan keputusan keluarga—termasuk kebutuhan sehari-hari, pendidikan anak, dan perawatan kesehatan—serta kemandirian dalam mengelola keuangan melalui tabungan dan arisan. Temuan ini menunjukkan bagaimana perempuan di pedesaan menegosiasikan dan mendefinisikan ulang peran gender melalui agensi ekonomi.

Kata Kunci: *Relasi Kuasa, Performativitas Gender, Dekonstruksi Identitas.*

INTRODUCTION

The absence of gender policy representation reflects a gap between the actual conditions of gender injustice and the implementation of gender-related policies. Within families, the division of roles between husband and wife continues to be debated and remains a sensitive and pressing issue in society. This begins with women's dissatisfaction at being positioned as the "second person," leading to gender differences and injustices that place women in a subordinate position to men in gender studies. Consequently, feminists have developed various theoretical frameworks to pursue equality between the sexes and between gender identities. Unfortunately, some of these theories have produced ideas that, instead of empowering women, tend to obscure their natural roles and functions—for instance, in addressing disparities in the workplace and domestic responsibilities within the family (Dewi 2021).

Eleven women in Besuk Kidul Village, Besuk District, Probolinggo Regency, face socio-economic conditions that compel them to assume the role of primary breadwinners within their families. This phenomenon occurs

among agricultural laborers and emerges as a response to various challenges faced by men, such as limited employment opportunities, declining health conditions, and the inability to meet the family's economic needs. This role shift is particularly significant to examine as it highlights gender relations within rural communities, which generally continue to uphold strong patriarchal values.

In this context, Judith Butler's feminist theory can be applied to understand that gender roles are not fixed but are shaped and interpreted through repeated social practices. Through the concepts of gender identity performativity, the deconstruction of gender fluidity, and the existence of the subject, Butler emphasizes that gender identity is not solely determined by biology but is constructed through actions and social experiences. Thus, the dominance of women as primary breadwinners among agricultural laborers can be viewed as a performative act that creates new identities while simultaneously resisting traditional gender constructions (Durmuş 2022; Polychroniou 2022; Tyler 2019).

Gender discrimination has long existed in traditional societies, both in the division of labor based on sex and on socially constructed gender roles (Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024; Sczesny, Formanowicz, and Moser 2016). Although women's contributions are highly significant in the workforce, the prevailing patriarchal culture often regards their work as unequal to men's and considers it unproductive. Nevertheless, in Besuk Kidul Village, Besuk District, Probolinggo Regency, women working as farm laborers also carry the burden of dual roles within the household. In this village, eleven women simultaneously serve as breadwinners while also performing domestic responsibilities such as caring for children, grandchildren, in-laws, and managing everyday household tasks. These dual roles arise from complex circumstances faced by their husbands—some suffer from illness and can no longer work, some have recovered but refuse to resume their responsibilities as heads of households, others spend their days idly, and in some cases, the husbands have passed away.

The key concepts of feminism, according to Judith Butler, as presented in her book *Trouble Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, are divided into six areas: gender performativity, identity deconstruction, intersectionality, power politics and resistance, and the existence of the subject (Hohman 2020);

Morgenroth and Ryan 2018). However, only three of Butler's ideas will be employed as analytical tools, as they are most relevant to the issues faced by women breadwinners among agricultural laborers in Besuk Kidul Village. These are: first, the performativity of identity; second, the deconstruction of fluidity; and third, the existence of subjects, particularly the dominance of women as primary breadwinners among farm laborers in Besuk Kidul. This study offers insights into social change and contributes to a scientific understanding of gender and identity, acknowledging that identity is a social construct shaped through daily practices rather than a fixed biological or natural entity, as viewed through Judith Butler's feminist perspective.

Previous studies on feminism highlight the dynamic nature of gender roles. Ningsih and Farida show that the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped family roles, with men taking on more domestic tasks and women engaging in online work, illustrating that gender roles shift in response to crises. Irwan et al. (2022) found similar changes in Minangkabau families, where traditional roles have adapted over time. Meanwhile, Setiawan (2021) emphasizes that household harmony is not determined by a woman's career but by the quality of spousal relationships, underscoring the interplay between gender, work, and family dynamics (Irwan et al. 2022).

The studies mentioned above share similarities and differences with this research. The similarity lies in their focus on feminism and women's roles in the workplace and everyday life. The difference, however, lies in the theoretical approach employed, namely Judith Butler's perspective. Therefore, this study is original and not a repetition of previous research. Butler's theory is considered relevant to the conditions of the eleven female agricultural laborers in Besuk Kidul Village, as it provides a scientific basis for deconstructing social norms that limit women's roles and opens up space for more just and inclusive social change. This study is expected to contribute to feminist scholarship, particularly through the application of Judith Butler's theory in the context of rural women farm laborers. Theoretically, it demonstrates how gender identity can be performatively constructed and is not fixed. Practically, the findings may inform relevant stakeholders in formulating policies for women's empowerment and foster broader discussions about women's economic roles within patriarchal social structures.

METHOD

This study is a field research employing a descriptive approach, aimed at exploring the forms of women's dominance as primary breadwinners among agricultural laborers in Besuk Kidul Village, Besuk District, Probolinggo Regency. The research involved eleven women who serve as the main earners in their families. Data were gathered through direct observation to gain insights into the social conditions and daily activities of the participants, and through semi-structured in-depth interviews to capture their experiences, perspectives, and manifestations of dominance. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive-analytical techniques, beginning with a detailed description of the women's dominance based on observations and interviews, followed by an interpretation through Judith Butler's feminist theory, focusing on three core indicators: gender identity performativity, the deconstruction of fluidity, and the existence of the subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Feminism According to Judith Butler

The dominance of women as primary breadwinners among agricultural laborers in Besuk Kidul Village is evident in various social practices. Women assume the role of primary household managers, make key family decisions, and handle finances through savings or rotating credit systems (*arisan*). These roles have been consistently performed over the past ten years, effectively replacing the traditional functions of men as heads of households due to physical limitations or economic factors. This demonstrates that women not only adapt to circumstances but also actively construct their social identities through the roles they perform consistently.

In her book *The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir 2014) stated that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." This assertion emphasizes that gender identity is not innate or biological, but is shaped through social and cultural processes. Findings from Besuk Kidul Village indicate that women become "women" in a structural sense because they continuously perform roles constructed by society as women's gendered responsibilities: managing the household, making family decisions, and earning a living. This supports de Beauvoir's view that gender identity is the result of habituation and the repetition of roles (Mahmoud 2024).

In the context of Judith Butler's theory, these findings reflect the concept of gender identity performativity, whereby gender identity is shaped through repeated actions that become institutionalized within social practices. Butler refers to this process as *metalepsis*, in which the reality of gender roles is constructed from events that are continuously repeated in the social environment. In Besuk Kidul Village, the fact that women have assumed roles traditionally held by men has become a normalized pattern, even naturalized within the community's daily life (Khan 2021).

The second stage of gender performativity, according to Butler, involves repetition and rituals that are culturally institutionalized. Women's actions—working in the fields, making household decisions, and managing finances independently—represent social performances that produce new gender identities. As Butler asserts, these actions constitute identity not because of biological traits, but because the process of repetition generates an effect of reality.

In the study conducted by Mulyani and Sari (2022), titled *Women as the Backbone of the Family: A Phenomenological Study of Agricultural Laborers in East Java*, it is explained that women's dominance within farm labor households arises from economic conditions that compel them to assume men's roles as primary breadwinners. Through a phenomenological approach involving ten female agricultural laborers, the study found that women not only drive the family's economic activities but also take on decision-making responsibilities across various aspects of household life, including financial management, children's education, and daily needs. This shift reflects a significant change in grassroots gender relations. Nevertheless, women's economic dominance does not automatically dismantle the entrenched patriarchal structure, as they continue to face social pressures and the burden of dual responsibilities in daily life.

The findings of Mulyani and Sari indicate that women's gender identities are shaped through practices continuously enacted within specific socio-economic contexts. This aligns with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which asserts that gender identity is not essential but constructed through repeated actions that are naturalized within social life. In other words, women's roles as the backbone of the family are not merely a response to economic needs but also a tangible expression of gender identity construction, continuously negotiated through their daily practices. This study

is significant because it demonstrates that women's dominance in domestic and economic spheres can coexist with persistent patriarchal social structures, thereby creating an ambivalent space for women's identities within an inherently unequal system (Mulyani and Sari 2022).

These findings are also relevant to Butler's notion of the deconstruction of identity fluidity. Women's identities in this village are not static but flexible, shaped by social and economic conditions. Women can perform both masculine and feminine roles simultaneously, or switch roles as needed. This perspective rejects rigid male–female dichotomies, aligning with non-binary principles that view gender as fluid and constantly evolving.

The third concept, the existence of the subject, explains how women establish themselves as active agents within a social system previously dominated by men. Women in this village are not merely “represented” by social structures; rather, they actively construct their own identities through tangible actions. This demonstrates that social structures, including laws and cultural norms, do not simply represent women but also shape and constrain their identities. As Butler critiques, seemingly neutral systems of representation actually produce gendered subjects based on unequal power relations. Sylvia Walby (1990) in theorizing Patriarchy, Walby identifies six structures through which patriarchy operates: the household, paid work, the state, violence, sexuality, and culture. In the context of this study, the primary patriarchal structures are evident in the household and paid work, where men's roles have diminished and women have taken over, yet still within an originally patriarchal social system. Women have become the primary breadwinners, but this dominance arises not from structural liberation but rather as an adaptation to economic pressures and the absence of men fulfilling their roles as heads of households. This aligns with Walby's view that patriarchy can shift its form while still maintaining gendered hierarchies (Al-Mutairi 2023).

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that women as primary breadwinners do not merely assume their roles out of necessity, but have engaged in a series of actions that performatively shape and affirm their social and gender identities. These roles reflect shifts in power structures within the family and society and underscore that gender identity is dynamic, constructed through actions, and constantly evolving.

The Dominance of Women as the Main Breadwinners among Farm Workers

Besuk Kidul Village is located in Besuk District, strategically positioned in the southern part of the district and well connected to surrounding areas. The village is rich in natural resources, culture, and traditions. It holds significant potential for development in agriculture, the economy, and tourism, and it has a long history closely linked to the overall development of Besuk District. The name "Besuk Kidul" is believed to derive from the local language, where "Besuk" means "settlement" and "Kidul" means "south," reflecting its location in the southern part of the district.

Over time, the village has undergone many changes, particularly in terms of infrastructure and local governance, which have continued to develop. The majority of residents rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, although other sectors such as trade and services are beginning to grow. Besuk Kidul Village is home to over 4,000 people, most of whom work as farmers. The population is predominantly of Javanese ethnicity, with a small number from Madurese and other ethnic groups that have long settled in the area. The dominant family structure is that of farming households, with most homes remaining relatively simple. The primary occupations include farming, with main crops such as rice, corn, and horticultural products. Some residents also work as laborers, traders, or in the service sector (Data Statistik Profesi Petani Di Desa Besuk 2024).

The governance of Besuk Kidul Village is led by a village head elected through local village elections. The village administration consists of the village head, a village secretary, and other officials responsible for managing administrative tasks and implementing development programs. Besuk Kidul Village has various distinctive traditions and cultural practices, one of the most notable being the annual Sedekah Bumi ceremony, held as an expression of gratitude to God for abundant agricultural yields. Additionally, the community continues to uphold the tradition of gotong-royong (mutual cooperation) in many aspects of life, including infrastructure development and organizing social events.

In terms of education, the village has several facilities such as elementary schools (SD) and kindergartens (TK). Children who wish to continue to junior high (SMP) or senior high school (SMA) generally travel to the nearest town. For healthcare, the village has a subsidiary community health

center (Puskesmas Pembantu) providing basic health services. For more advanced medical care, residents usually visit healthcare facilities in Probolinggo City (Desa 2024).

The socio-cultural conditions of the community in Besuk Kidul Village are strongly influenced by Islam. Similarly, following Madurese traditions, men—particularly husbands—are generally expected to provide for the family, while women are responsible for managing household affairs. This is consistent with the fact that the majority of the Besuk Kidul community adheres to a patriarchal system. Meanwhile, the eleven women in these families have different conditions and backgrounds, which can be categorized into three groups. The first category consists of families whose husbands have passed away: Mothers A–F (ages 29, 32, 41, 50, 52, and 54). Family A and B live with two children who are still in elementary school, while Family C consists of two married children, one grandchild who is a toddler, and one in-law, in addition to one child still in elementary school. Family D lives alone as all of her children are married and have established their own households. Family E lives with one married child, three married grandchildren, one grandchild still in elementary school, and one in-law. Finally, Family F lives with one grandchild who has graduated from senior high school but is currently unemployed.

The second category consists of families whose husbands are alive but unemployed or not working: Mothers G–I (ages 38, 50, and 52). Family G lives with one child who is still in junior high school, while Family H consists of one child, one in-law, and two grandchildren who are still in elementary school. Family I includes one grandchild who is married but does not live with their spouse, two grandchildren in junior high school, one toddler grandchild, and one in-law. The third category includes two families whose husbands are alive but have serious health conditions preventing them from working, such as paralysis due to stroke or end-stage diabetes requiring amputation of hands and toes: Mothers J and K (ages 48 and 49). Family J lives with three married children, one grandchild in junior high school, and one toddler grandchild, while Family K consists of one child, one in-law, and one grandchild who is still in kindergarten.

The three conditions described above have resulted in these women taking on dual roles within their households. They are responsible not only for managing domestic chores but also for replacing their husbands over the past

ten years as the primary breadwinners. Originally, only housewives, they have had to assume responsibility for meeting their families' economic needs. This situation has also placed their households in a lower to middle economic bracket, with limited or insufficient income.

Several forms of dominant behavior among the eleven women primary breadwinners in Besuk Kidul Village, Besuk District, Probolinggo Regency, are as follows. First, women or wives play a central role in the household by managing daily chores, such as sweeping the house, washing dishes, doing laundry, and hanging clothes to dry. Second, wives act as key decision-makers in family matters, including daily needs, children's education, and healthcare. Third, in managing family finances, the wives participate in rotating savings groups (*arisan*) and personal savings. Money from *arisan* is typically used to purchase household necessities, while personal savings are often used to buy meat or other items for Eid celebrations. Wives have full control over family finances. Within their households, relationships are collectively oriented, with wives taking a dominant role for the benefit of the family. They believe that, given the limited family income and circumstances, the household budget must be sufficient, and that only the wives are responsible for managing family expenditures.

Feminist Analysis of the Dominance of Women as Main Breadwinners Among Farm Workers

The forms of dominant behavior exhibited by the eleven women primary breadwinners among agricultural laborers in Besuk Kidul Village, Besuk District, Probolinggo Regency, are as follows. First, women or wives play a central role in the household by managing the division of daily chores, such as sweeping, washing dishes, doing laundry, and hanging clothes to dry. Second, wives serve as the primary decision-makers in family matters, including daily needs, children's education, and healthcare. Third, in managing family finances, wives participate in rotating savings groups (*arisan*) and personal savings. Money from *arisan* is generally used for household necessities, while personal savings are often allocated for purchasing meat or other items in preparation for Eid celebrations.

Judith Butler also highlights several indicators reflecting the relationship between sex and gender, showing how certain stages lead to the emergence of phenomena related to both sex and gender. Regarding the first key concept—gender identity performativity according to Butler—there are two stages. In

the first stage, within the families of the eleven women agricultural laborers in Besuk Kidul, the reality is that men are unable to fulfill their duties and responsibilities as household heads due to three conditions observed in these families: death, unemployment, or serious health conditions such as stroke causing paralysis, and end-stage diabetes resulting in the amputation of hands and toes.

The circumstances of these eleven women, who live with children, in-laws, grandchildren, and even husbands or men who do not work, have resulted in them taking on dual roles within the household. They are responsible not only for domestic chores but also for replacing their husbands as breadwinners. Originally, they were solely housewives, yet they have had to assume responsibility for fulfilling their families' economic needs. This situation has also placed their households in the lower- to middle-income bracket, with limited or insufficient income.

The second stage of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity involves a continuous temporal duration that extends from the first stage, linked to the passage of time. Over the past ten years, these women have replaced the roles of their husbands or male family members, which has led to the formation and transformation of their gender identities. Initially performing the role of a housewife caring for the family, they have gradually adopted masculine attributes by becoming the family's primary earners. This shift has transformed the gender identity phenomenon among women in these families in Besuk Kidul Village.

The second key concept, flexible gender, refers to the desire for a fluid gender identity. Individuals who embrace this concept do not claim or commit to a single gender simply because they feel aligned with it. They adopt non-binary principles, meaning that not all individuals fit neatly into the categories of male or female. Those with fluid gender identities can shift from one gender to another or express multiple genders simultaneously (Belinda 2022). Therefore, it is reasonable for someone to identify as a woman in the morning, a man at night, or both simultaneously as gender-neutral. According to Butler, the subject is always in process because gender is unstable and never reaches a fixed, legitimate identity. From Butler's perspective on performativity, gender is transformed from an inherent, natural human characteristic into a "performative act." Butler explains in her work on gender that there is no singular actor behind each action; in other words, the subject does not

determine gender—gender determines the subject. One acts as a woman because they are recognized as such, not because they were born female.

Regarding the deconstruction of identity fluidity, the situation in Besuk Kidul Village reveals several relevant aspects from Butler's framework. The first relates to societal assumptions about gender roles in the village, which are strongly influenced by Islam and Madurese traditions, where men are expected to provide for the family and women manage the household. The majority of the community in Besuk Kidul adheres to a patriarchal system. Conversely, Butler argues that gender has no fixed beginning or end, making it plausible for someone to identify as male in the morning, female at night, or both at the same time.

The dominance of women among agricultural laborers in Besuk Kidul reflects a flexible approach to gender. These women adopt non-binary ideas, meaning that not everyone fits into existing gender categories and that they do not wish to be confined to a single identity. Gender instability in these families evolves over time and is influenced by socio-cultural conditions. As a result, women in this village do not have a single, fixed gender identity. The phenomenon observed in Besuk Kidul shows a neutral gender identity in which women embody both masculine and feminine traits, either simultaneously or at different times.

Finally, Judith Butler's key concept regarding the existence of the subject in relation to the issue of female dominance in Besuk Kidul Village emphasizes that women are often positioned as the subjects of feminism. In reality, however, the subject is not the determinant of gender identity; rather, it is performative actions that construct the subject itself. Women in this village can therefore be regarded as subjects because their identities are formed through a series of performative acts. An individual's identity is always constituted through such acts. According to Butler, the subject is never complete or fixed, but always in the process of becoming. (Heyrovský, Vavříčka, and Heyrovská 1973). Although the gendered body manifests itself in various ways, it possesses no fixed ontological status. Identity is continuously shaped by actions rather than by mere decisions. This implies that the subject is always in process and never attains a final, complete identity. It is therefore not surprising that an individual born as female may express her femininity at one moment, shift to a masculine identity at another, return to femininity, or even embody both simultaneously at different points in time.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that women's dominance as primary breadwinners in farming households redefines domestic roles, financial management, and decision-making, while simultaneously performing and reshaping gender identity. Informed by Butler's feminist framework, the findings reveal that this phenomenon is not merely a response to economic necessity but a transformation of gender relations that challenges patriarchal norms from within. Women's economic agency demonstrates the fluidity of gender, as they embody both femininity and masculinity according to social and economic demands. At both household and community levels, these shifts reshape authority, responsibility, and survival strategies, while also influencing younger generations' perceptions of gender roles. Ultimately, women's economic dominance illustrates resilience and negotiation, underscoring gender identity as a dynamic process that is continuously enacted and redefined in rural life.

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