





Feminist economic theology and gender justice: The case of fisherwomen in Moluccas



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This article evaluates feminist economic theology as embodied by fisherwomen in the Moluccas, Indonesia. These women, who support families and communities, remain largely invisible in both economic and theological discourses. Fieldwork in eight coastal villages revealed that they carry a double burden – productive labour at sea and unpaid domestic work – while facing structural exclusion. Despite these challenges, they create communal economies based on solidarity and sharing, drawing theological meaning from their Christian faith and local culture. This study uses a feminist theology framework, particularly the works of Ivone Gebara and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, to explore whether their economic theology reflects an inclusive and transformative vision. The study argues that while elements of resistance are present, a fully gender-just theology is still developing.

Contribution: This study contributes to feminist economic theology by revealing that the economic practices of fisherwomen in the Moluccas are not merely material, but deeply theological. Their practices embody Christian values of solidarity and sharing, transforming economics into a theology that emphasises social justice and self-sacrifice – values overlooked in mainstream economic theory. By foregrounding the lived experiences of marginalised fisherwomen, the article challenges androcentric and capitalist frameworks, offering alternative theological perspectives that enrich the discourse on feminist economic theology.

Keywords: feminist theology; economic justice; fisherwomen; gender; Moluccas.

Introduction

Discrimination against fisherwomen, who play an important role in improving the economic welfare of coastal communities, is an ongoing problem globally, nationally and locally (Budiman 2023; Napitupulu & Tanaya 2021; Rahman 2022). In Indonesia, 42% of the workforce in the fisheries sector are women and are directly involved in harvesting fish and other marine resources (Napitupulu 2023; Napitupulu & Tanaya 2021). Fisherwomen contribute 169 000 metric tons of fish annually, valued at \$253 million, and often work over 17 h daily, compared to 10–15 h for male fishermen (Rahmasari 2022). Their contribution is very important to family income, where 48% of fishing household income comes from fisherwomen. Additionally, their work practices are often more environmentally friendly (Apituley 2022:43–58). Despite this, the majority of fisherwomen are still excluded from policy, lacking access to formal support programmes and recognition within the dominant economic system (Indrawasih & Pradipta 2021:22–25; Purwanti et al. 2023:121–136). This marginalisation especially occurs in Moluccas, where cultural and religious structures exacerbate the invisibility of fisherwomen (Apituley 2021).

In the context of the islands of the Moluccas, the presence of fisherwomen is a real social and economic reality. These women perform a variety of jobs: fishing on the high seas, growing seaweed, collecting shellfish along the coast and selling fish through traditional sales methods on the streets and in markets (in this case, they are locally known as *jibu-jibu*).¹ In eight research villages, such as Waai, Leahari, Seri, Latuhalat, Lermatang, Kobaur, Apari and Wab, fisherwomen were found to work longer hours than their husbands and even other family members. After accompanying their husbands to sea, they continued selling fish at the market or on the streets, while her husband rested. Even when they are not fishing, they wake up early to prepare food and fishing equipment, wait for their husbands to return and then start selling. Heavy workloads, coupled with a lack of rest time, indicate gender-based labour exploitation. However, many fisherwomen state that their happiness lies in the happiness of their children

¹*Jibu-jibu* is a local term in Moluccas referring to fisherwomen who sell their fish door-to-door or in traditional markets, offering it at a discounted 'sisterhood' price through direct engagement with buyers.

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and husbands – an internalised altruism shaped by socio-cultural norms that make women the primary caregivers and economic supporters of the family.

On the other hand, the method of selling fish carried out by *jibu-jibu* is not only economical, but also has deep social and theological meanings. Fisherwomen often offer fish at ‘sisterhood prices’ [*harga sodara*],² which reflects strong family values, affection and solidarity. For them, the market is more than just a place for transactions. The market is a space for shared life where mutual care and respect for fellow humans are prioritised. The act of sharing food and sustenance reflects the communal spirit of the ‘Lord’s Supper’ (Iwamony 2022), embodying a living theology of solidarity. Through these practices, fisherwomen transform economic activities into sacred gatherings rooted in Christian faith and local Moluccan cultural values. In this way, their economic transactions challenge the dominance of transactional capitalist logic by centring relationality and care.

One fisherwoman said that she discovered new spiritual energy when selling fish at *sisterhood price* (Interview with fisherwoman, Leahari village, 26 July 2024). The ‘price of sisterhood’ emphasises solidarity over profit. Within this cultural-theological framework, economic transactions are not solely about material exchange, but about maintaining communal ties. The joy of giving and relational satisfaction outweigh the financial value of the transaction (Schwarzkopf 2020). This is in line with Stefan Schwarzkopf’s concept of understanding economics as a form of theology, where economic life expresses deeper moral and spiritual commitments (Schwarzkopf 2020). For fisherwomen in the Moluccas, economic activity is a manifestation of theology, which values shared life, human dignity and collective communal growth.

Seasonal changes in the Moluccas greatly influence fisherwomen’s economic strategies. During the dry season, most families focus on fishing; in the rainy season, many turn to farming. However, some other fisherwomen prefer to fish all year round, citing faster and more predictable results: ‘Even if the catch is small, at least we bring home what we need’ (Interview with fisherwoman, Latuhalat village, 26 July 2024). This perspective reflects pragmatic adaptation to economic insecurity, but it also reveals a harsh reality: poor communities often lack resilience in purely market-based economies. Many fisherwomen are aware of fluctuations in fish availability and prices, and relate them to natural rhythms – waves, tides and seasons. As one woman put it, ‘Sometimes I come home with nothing. That’s life’ (Interview with fisherwoman, Leahari village, 26 July 2024). This embodied wisdom shows how fisherwomen interpret economic uncertainty through a theological and ecological lens – one based on humility, resilience and trust in divine providence.

2. The price of the sisterhood is intended to increase the number of fish purchased by the buyer by two to three fish.

This study highlights the dual role of fisherwomen who, apart from catching fish, also perform important tasks such as selling at the market, caring for children and taking care of the household. This is often done in harsh and unrecognised working conditions. In contexts where women are expected to simultaneously serve as caregivers and breadwinners, their work is often framed as altruism – an assumption deeply rooted in social and religious norms. However, the theological dimensions of this work, particularly the way their economic practices reflect the Christian values of sharing and solidarity, reveal a more complex intersection between faith, gender and economics.

This article aims to analyse the economic practices of fisherwomen in the Moluccas through the lens of feminist theology and economic justice. Using a qualitative-narrative approach and critical theological reflection, this study explores whether these practices represent a liberative theology or merely reproduce systemic inequality. By critically engaging with the economic practices of fisherwomen in the Moluccas, this study seeks to contribute to broader conversations on feminist theology, economic justice and the role of women in shaping sustainable communities.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a field-based ethnographic design (Creswell & Poth 2018:4, 148, 164), suited to exploring the meanings communities attach to their socio-spiritual realities. The research focuses on the lived experiences and theological reflections of fisherwomen in the Moluccas, particularly concerning economic justice, gender roles and their embodiment within church life.

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 40 fisherwomen and focus group discussions across eight sites in Ambon, Kei, Tanimbar and Aru. These sites were purposively selected to reflect the region’s socio-cultural and ecclesial diversity. All data were transcribed, translated where needed and analysed thematically to identify core themes such as spirituality, economic agency, resistance and communal values.

Theologically, the study uses an inductive approach that grounds critical reflection ‘from below’, with field narratives informing theological meaning. Thematic findings were interpreted using feminist theological lenses – specifically Ivone Gebara’s ecofeminism, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical hermeneutics, and Nancy Fraser’s justice theory. This interpretive movement reframes theology in light of embodied economic and spiritual practices, contributing to a contextual feminist economic theology.

A reflexive stance was taken to acknowledge the positionality of the researchers as ordained ministers of the Protestant Church in the Moluccas (Gereja Protestan Maluku, GPM) and theology lecturers at Indonesian Christian University in the Moluccas. This dual insider role facilitated trust, but also raised ethical considerations regarding interpretive authority.

Dialogical engagement and mutual respect were prioritised to ensure that theological insights emerged through collaborative reflection, rather than extraction, within the participants' ecclesial lifeworlds.

Conceptual framework

Discrimination is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2025) as:

[T]reating a person or particular group of people differently, especially in a worse way than the way in which you treat other people, because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc. (n.p.)

This concept implies that discrimination involves unequal, unfair or detrimental treatment of others, which deprives them of the rights they are entitled to. Discrimination can occur based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, social status, economic status, age, sexual orientation and other factors. One significant contributor to this discriminatory attitude is the patriarchal cultural system, which leads to the marginalisation of fisherwomen. In highly patriarchal societies, fishing is considered a male-dominated profession because of its challenging and dangerous nature, with women perceived as weak and in need of protection. This cultural norm results in injustice for fisherwomen, who, in reality, perform highly demanding work across all stages – preparation, catching and marketing. In the Moluccas, fisherwomen sacrifice their life for the happiness of their families by engaging in fishing activities, yet their contributions are often overlooked because of their gender.

Nancy Folbre, a feminist economist, who has conducted extensive research on women's work and gender inequality in the economy, discusses the forms of injustice experienced by women, such as unpaid work (Folbre 2001:4), social norms (Folbre 2001:6), double burdens, a lack of access to economic power (Folbre 2009b:22), biased economic measurement systems and gender stereotypes in the labour market (Folbre 2009a:87). These forms of injustice are evident among fisherwomen in the Moluccas. They prepare food and fishing equipment, catch and market the fish, but their domestic responsibilities remain after completing their work without sufficient rest. Despite the intensity of their work, they are not recognised as legitimate fishers, which limits their access to government assistance for the development of the fishing sector and prevents their inclusion in fisher groups that advocate for fisherfolk's rights and policies. Thus, Folbre's dominant findings, such as unpaid work, social norms, double burdens, a lack of access to economic power and biased economic measurement systems, resonate deeply with the experiences of fisherwomen in the Moluccas.

The impacts of these injustices are diverse and far-reaching, including the feminisation of poverty (Pearce 1978), economic dependency (Folbre 2009b:9), low access to social and legal protection (FAO 2022), a lack of representation in decision-making (Sen 2001) and cross-generational impacts (Moser 2021). According to Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), a capability approach is necessary to fulfil

women's economic rights. This approach assesses individual wellbeing based on their ability to function and choose. Sen emphasised that true wellbeing is not solely measured by income or utility, but by an individual's freedom to choose the life they value. In this context, structural reforms, public policy support, socio-cultural changes and strong political commitment are crucial:

- Structural reform: Eliminating structural barriers that limit women's ability to function optimally.
- Public policy support: Implementing policies and programmes that support women's capabilities, such as access to education and healthcare.
- Socio-cultural change: Transforming social norms that restrict women's roles and freedoms in society.
- Strong political commitment: Ensuring political will to implement policies that support gender equality.

Freedom to flourish economically and socially is not merely a policy issue – it is also a theological concern. When structural, cultural and political systems limit this freedom, they obstruct a divine gift. Theology, therefore, must extend beyond the pulpit and enter public discourse, addressing justice, human dignity and the rights of women. Social justice is a living expression of faith, and advocacy for marginalised groups like fisherwomen forms a vital part of the Church's prophetic vocation. Recognising fisherwomen as legitimate economic agents is not only an act of justice, but also a reflection of theological integrity.

Feminist theological perspectives provide crucial insights into this intersection of faith and justice. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1993) argues that a Christian theology of justice must go beyond service to include mutual empowerment, especially for those historically expected to serve without recognition. Ivone Gebara (1999) insists that if women work and serve but remain poor and unvalued, then what is often labelled as 'Christian love' becomes a spiritualisation of injustice rather than liberation. Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) critiques the theological justification of patriarchy and calls for an ethical, inclusive and egalitarian theology. Meanwhile, Nancy Fraser's (1997) vision of justice requires parity of participation, where all individuals can engage as equals in social life – not only as caregivers or supporters, but also as full agents with the right to flourish.

In this framework, the economic practices of fisherwomen – particularly those rooted in solidarity, sharing and care – can be understood as a form of prophetic praxis. These practices resist systemic injustice while expressing the core values of the Christian faith, reflecting a theology 'from below' that arises from lived experiences rather than abstract doctrines. These theological insights resonate with voices from the Global South. Chung Hyun Kyung (1990) speaks of grassroots women's embodied spirituality as a form of sacred resistance; Musimbi Kanyoro (2002) calls for cultural hermeneutics grounded in local women's lived experiences; and Melba Maggay (1996) emphasises the spiritual resilience of poor women in Southeast Asia. Collectively, these perspectives

TABLE 1: Activities of fisherwomen in eight research locations.

Village and region	Production	Reproduction	Social	Spiritual
Leahari, Latuhalat, Seri and Waai (Ambon Island)	Fishing (baiting, netting), seaweed cultivation, ' <i>bameti</i> ' and selling seafood	Caring for family, managing household and gardening	Participating in village social activities	Prayers before going to sea and customary rituals when fishing
(Lermatang) South Tanimbar Islands	Fishing, seaweed cultivation, ' <i>bameti</i> ' and selling fish	Caring for family, educating children and assisting husband	Participating in fishermen's groups	Customary taboos related to menstruation and prayers before going to sea
Apara and Kobaur (Aru Islands)	Fishing, seaweed cultivation and selling seafood	Managing household, gardening and educating children	Involvement in village activities	Customary rituals and prayers before going to sea
Wab (Kei Kecil Islands)	Fishing (' <i>laor</i> ', snapper), seaweed cultivation and selling seafood	Caring for family and planting food crops	Assisting family in seaweed cultivation business	Customary taboos and prayers before going to sea

Note: Data compiled from field interviews, 2024.

'*Laor*' is a local term used by the Moluccas people to denote a type of small sea worm (usually called sea worm or polychaete), which appears seasonally, especially in March or April, after the full moon. The phenomenon of the emergence of *laor* is known as the *laor* season, and is an important moment economically, culturally and spiritually for coastal communities, especially on Ambon Island and its surroundings.

affirm the theological relevance of fisherwomen's practices in the Moluccas as prophetic, lived theology rooted in resistance and hope.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Indonesian Christian University in the Moluccas (reference no.: 252/UKIM.H5.FFT/C/2025).

Results and discussion

The existence of fisherwomen in eight research locations

Fisherwomen in the Moluccas play a central role in sustaining the economic life of their families and coastal communities. However, their contributions often remain invisible in official narratives – both in state policies and church programmes. To explore this dynamic, this study maps the everyday activities of fisherwomen in eight villages across four island regions: Ambon, Kei, Tanimbar and Aru. These activities are categorised into productive work (e.g. *bameti*,³ fishing, seaweed cultivation, fish selling or the work of jibu-jibu), reproductive work (e.g. food preparation, child-rearing and supporting husbands) and social-spiritual engagement.

By presenting these regional findings, this article highlights the pattern of double and even triple workloads borne by fisherwomen, and how they interpret their economic roles not only as a necessity, but also as spiritual and communal responsibility. These findings serve as the foundation for assessing whether their practices reflect a liberative and gender-just theology – drawing on the frameworks of Ivone Gebara, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether – or whether they reinforce patriarchal structures embedded in religious and cultural traditions. The fisherwomen's roles in each location are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 illustrates the multifaceted roles performed by fisherwomen in eight research locations, organised into four domains: productive, reproductive, social and spiritual. The productive role refers to activities such as fishing, seaweed farming and seafood trading – highlighting their

³*Bameti* is a local term from Moluccas for women's activities of collecting marine products such as snails, fish and others when the tide is low.

economic contributions. The reproductive role encompasses domestic duties, including childcare, food preparation and household management. The social role involves active engagement in community networks and collective enterprises. The spiritual role reflects adherence to customary beliefs and practices, such as prayers before going to sea and observance of taboos.

These findings show that fisherwomen are not merely passive supporters of their households but are active agents in sustaining economic livelihoods and preserving cultural identity. Their spiritual engagement reinforces a theological dimension to their economic activities, suggesting a deeper connection between livelihood and faith. By carrying out productive, reproductive, social and spiritual roles, fisherwomen demonstrate a holistic contribution to the resilience and sustainability of coastal communities. This complexity challenges narrow economic definitions of labour and opens space for a theological revaluation of gendered work in marine societies.

Discrimination experienced by fisherwomen in eight research locations

Although fisherwomen play a very important and complex role, in reality, they experience a lot of discrimination. This is illustrated in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, fisherwomen across all locations face layered discrimination – structural, cultural, institutional and economic. These barriers range from a lack of legal recognition to exclusion from decision-making and unjust profit-sharing. Together, they reflect systemic gender bias embedded in both traditional customs and state mechanisms.

Integrating male perspectives and broader feminist theologies

To provide a more holistic view of gender relations within Moluccan fishing communities, this section incorporates male perspectives alongside those of fisherwomen. While men continue to dominate access to capital, equipment and marine territories, many are beginning to recognise women's growing roles in seaweed farming, fish processing and trade. These evolving dynamics suggest that gender roles are relational and negotiated, rather than fixed binaries.

TABLE 2: Types of discrimination experienced by fisherwomen in eight research locations.

Villages and region	Structural discrimination	Cultural and normative discrimination	Institutional discrimination	Economic discrimination
Leahari, Latuhalat, Seri and Waai (Ambon Island)	Women's labour not recognised in National Identity Card (Kartu Tanda Penduduk/KTP) as 'fisher'; no access to aid programmes	Women are seen as helpers, not main actors; gender roles limit mobility	Fisher groups' aid often directed to men; women are excluded from village meetings	Women manage and sell fish, but are not involved in pricing or profit decisions
(Lermatang) South Tanimbar Islands	KTP not as 'fisher' → cannot access state support	Taboos around menstruation and fishing; women discouraged from going to sea	Training programmes offered only to select people (relatives of village elites)	Profits from fishing shared unfairly; women often depend on husband's permission
Apara and Kobaur (Aru Islands)	Women excluded from fisher statistics and aid	<i>Adat</i> restricts certain marine activities; seen as shameful for women to fish	Village support tends to go to male-headed households or relatives	Seaweed business run by women, but marketed under male names
Wab (Kei Kecil Islands)	Aid only for men registered in official fisher groups	Strong taboos (no fishing while menstruating, no noise at home when men at sea)	Proposal for women's fisher group rejected repeatedly by authorities	No savings because of small profit; loans accessed with high interest; informal debt to family

Source: Data compiled from field interviews, 2024

TABLE 3: Gendered perspectives and evolving dynamics in Moluccan fishing communities.

Region	Male perspective	Female perspective	Gender dynamics
Ambon Island	Men dominant; gradual acceptance	Women active post-harvest	Norms persist, slowly shifting
South Tanimbar	Recognise joint roles	Strong role in seaweed economy	Improving, but barriers remain
Aru Islands	Restrict women's sea involvement	Active in marketing, some at sea	Conflict between tradition and change
Kei Islands	Supportive of women's contributions	Independent fishers and traders	More egalitarian, though limited

Note: Field data collected in 2024.

As shown in Table 3, regions such as the Kei Islands exhibit more egalitarian patterns, whereas others remain shaped by patriarchal constraints. This underscores the need for gender analysis that captures both resistance and adaptation within these communities.

These relational gender patterns echo Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of *adaptive masculinities* and Judith Jordan's notion of *relational resilience* as developed within Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan 1992). They also align with feminist theological calls for co-agency and mutuality (Gebara 1999; Russell 1993). Importantly, feminist theologians from Asia and Africa offer critical perspectives. Kanyoro (2002) critiques the church's complicity in reinforcing patriarchal structures; Kyung (1990) advocates active solidarity with suffering women; and Maggay (1996) envisions Christianity as a transformative social force. These voices deepen the theological analysis and affirm the urgency of inclusive, justice-oriented ecclesial engagement.

The dimensions of fisherwomen's feminist economic theology

Fisherwomen across eight research sites in the Moluccas embody a distinctive form of feminist economic theology. Grounded in lived experience rather than formal doctrine, this theology is expressed through interwoven practices of faith, economic collaboration, ecological stewardship, mutual care and cultural resistance. These interconnected dimensions are summarised in Table 4.

These dimensions are not discrete categories, but facets of a holistic, embodied theology that sustains fisherwomen amid social marginalisation and ecological pressures.

TABLE 4: The dimensions of fisherwomen's feminist economic theology.

Dimension	Expressions of feminist economic theology
Spiritual-economic praxis	Integrating labour with prayer; observing taboos; attributing outcomes to 'God's blessing'
Egalitarian family economics	Collaborative sharing of tasks among husbands, wives and children, both at sea and on land
Environmental stewardship	Sustainable seaweed cultivation; caring for ecosystems; honouring natural cycles
Mutual care and social solidarity	Informal interest-free lending; cooperative marketing; prioritising household welfare
Resistance and agency	Defying patriarchal prohibitions; challenging cultural taboos; fostering daughters' independence

Source: Field interviews, 2024

Their spirituality is seamlessly integrated with labour and social relations, while acts of mutual care often serve as quiet resistance to patriarchal norms.

Fisherwomen's economic lives in the Moluccas are marked by an inseparable intertwining of spiritual vocation, ecological consciousness and embodied resistance. Their labour is not understood merely as economic survival, but as a sacred calling, grounded in everyday spiritual praxis. Prayers accompany fishing activities and ritual observances – such as keeping the kitchen fire burning while men are at sea – are believed to invite divine blessing (Interview, NK, Wab – Kei Kecil, 25 August 2024). While menstrual taboos continue to limit some women's mobility, others assert agency by fishing during their periods, quietly praying for protection. One woman testified, '*Beta pergi pancing diam-diam, tapi tetap doa. Tuhan tahu beta kerja untuk keluarga*' [I go fishing quietly, but I still pray. God knows I work for my family]. Ecological care is also shaped by theological conviction; tending seaweed crops is perceived as stewardship [*penjagaan ciptaan*] and an act of faith. As one woman from Kobaur shared, she checks her seaweed lines daily '*seperti jaga anak sendiri*' [like caring for my own child], underscoring the intimate, spiritual dimension of environmental labour (Interview, BS, Kobaur – Aru Islands, 20 August 2024).

This sacred-economic logic extends into household and communal structures, where egalitarian values and mutual care underpin daily life. Within families, men and women often share roles fluidly – spouses alternate fishing duties, and children assist in seaweed cultivation (Interview, RL, Leahari – Ambon, 26 July 2024). A woman from Apara described her family as '*kerja sama, bukan atur-atur*'

[collaborative, not authoritarian], resisting rigid patriarchal norms (Interview, MS, Apra – Aru Islands, 20 August 2024). Solidarity also manifests in informal community systems: women engage in interest-free lending, shared fish marketing and cooperative transport – all of which prioritise relational wellbeing over individual profit (Interview, LH, Latuhalat – Ambon, 26 July 2024). Resistance is not always overt, but it is theologically potent. In Lermatang, one fisherwoman continues to fish during menstruation '*karena beta harus hidup juga*' [because I have to survive too], defying cultural restrictions for the sake of her household (Interview, NK, Lermatang – Tanimbar Islands, 18 August 2024). Meanwhile, mothers in Waai are raising daughters to become economically self-reliant, equipping them with skills to challenge gender norms in both market and marine spaces (Interview, RR, Waai – Ambon, 26 July 2024). These lived practices constitute a feminist economic theology from below – rooted in struggle, sustained by faith and oriented towards justice within everyday life.

The role of churches and religious institutions in fisherwomen's lives

Fisherwomen in the Moluccas sustain both household economies and coastal livelihoods through daily labour and relational networks. Their roles, however, are shaped not only by socio-economic conditions and customary law (*adat*), but also by religious teachings and ecclesial attitudes. Churches – as moral and theological institutions – can either challenge gender injustice or inadvertently legitimise it through silence or complicity. Field research revealed a range of ecclesial responses, from active support to passive affirmation of patriarchal norms. These patterns are summarised in Table 5.

Overall, the data shown in Table 5 reveal a predominantly neutral or passive stance by churches towards fisherwomen's economic and theological agency. Only in Lermatang was there active theological and institutional support, while in most other locations, religious leaders either deferred to patriarchal *adat* or offered only moral encouragement without structural advocacy. This absence of prophetic engagement limits the transformative potential of religious institutions. Such institutional passivity reflects what Ivone Gebara terms the 'failure of theology to liberate when it does not emerge from the experience of oppressed women' (1999:53). Although fisherwomen construct their own *feminist economic theology from below*, the institutional church remains largely disengaged from this contextual praxis. In effect, the church risks reproducing what Nancy Fraser calls a *double injustice*: the misrecognition of fisherwomen's contributions and the maldistribution of resources and theological legitimacy (Fraser 1997:19).

This institutional gap becomes even more stark when viewed through Asian and African feminist theological lenses. Musimbi Kanyoro argues that churches often adopt patriarchal cultures uncritically, rather than interrogate them (Kanyoro 2002:41). In the Moluccan context – where ecclesial authority

TABLE 5: Church's responses to the role of fisherwomen in four island regions.

Region and village	Church and religious leader response	Category	Brief note
Ambon Island			
Leahari	Present in social activities, but no specific support	Neutral	Lacks proactive gender support
Latuhalat	Involved in seafood processing with women	Somewhat Supportive	Participation allowed, but not yet structurally affirmed
Seri	Provides moral support without gender advocacy	Neutral	Women seen as complementary, not equal agents
Waai	Acknowledges women's work, but defers to <i>adat</i>	Neutral Unjust	Church avoids challenging patriarchal customs
South Tanimbar Islands			
Lermatang	Facilitates women's economic groups	Supportive	Pastor affirms gender equality in household life
Aru Islands			
Kobraur	Participates in rituals, but silent on women's roles	Neutral Unjust	Ecclesial silence affirms status quo
Apra	Embedded in <i>adat</i> structure; no advocacy	Passive involvement	Absence of theological critique of gender norms
Kei Islands			
Wab	Pastor attends Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) but offers no gender affirmation	Neutral (passive)	Implicit tolerance without active support
	Fails to critique menstrual taboos	Passive involvement	Harmful customs remain unchanged

Source: Field interviews, 2024
FGDs, focus group discussions.

frequently overlaps with customary law – this uncritical stance legitimises structural injustice. Similarly, Chung Hyun Kyung urges churches to move from *passive moralism* to *active solidarity*, especially with women whose suffering is often spiritualised or romanticised without systemic redress (Kyung 1990:62). Melba Maggay further emphasises that Christianity must serve as an agent of social transformation, not a 'guardian of the status quo' (Maggay 1996:21).

Seen from this perspective, many Moluccan churches fall short of embodying what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza envisions as a 'discipleship of equals' (1993:120). While fisherwomen enact egalitarian and theologically rich practices in daily life, ecclesial structures have yet to affirm or integrate their agency into theological discourse and leadership roles.

In sum, while grassroots expressions of feminist economic theology thrive among fisherwomen, they remain institutionally unsupported. For the church to become a site of liberation rather than complicity, it must critically engage with local culture, affirm gender justice theologically and institutionalise its solidarity with women who sustain both faith and economy at the margins.

Fisherwomen and the work of jibu-jibu: Invisible roles and hidden discrimination

Jibu-jibu are women who play a critical yet often overlooked role within the fisheries economy in the Moluccas. Unlike women who participate directly in fishing activities at sea, *jibu-jibu* focus on processing and marketing the catch – selling fish in markets or directly to consumers. Despite their

central contribution in ensuring that fisheries products reach households and generate income, they remain invisible in both social recognition and formal fisheries policies. As one fisherwoman from Wab (Kei Kecil Islands) stated:

'We are not considered fishery, even though without us, the fish catch that fishermen have obtained cannot be sold. But in government reports or assistance, we are never taken into account.' (Interview, MTJ, Wab – Kei Kecil, 25 August 2024)

The marginalisation of *jibu-jibu* reflects deeper structural and cultural discrimination. Their labour is excluded from fisheries statistics, and they are denied access to state aid typically reserved for those formally registered as fishers – usually men at sea. Their work is also culturally devalued, often regarded as merely supportive or less strenuous, reinforcing gendered hierarchies within the household and community. Yet their contribution is vital to household survival and local economies. As a fisherwoman from Lermatang explained:

'We also help the family, even though we only sell fish. We have to be smart in managing the results – even if we're not seen like those who go to sea.' (Interview, IS, Lermatang – Tanimbar Islands, 18 August 2024)

In response to this marginalisation, *jibu-jibu* cultivate a form of feminist economic theology from below, expressed through spiritual praxis, mutual solidarity and everyday resistance. Many engage in prayer before selling fish, viewing their labour as divinely blessed despite a lack of recognition. Their work often reflects egalitarian family dynamics, where spouses and children share responsibilities across land and sea. They also uphold sustainability ethics through careful handling of fresh fish and long-term business practices. As one woman from Ambon stated: 'We sell fish with prayer, hoping that God will bless it, even though our work is not as visible as those who go to sea' (Interview, NK, Ambon Island, 26 July 2024). By continuing to work, support others and challenge restrictive gender norms, *jibu-jibu* embody a theologically grounded resistance to patriarchal exclusion.

Evaluating feminist economic theology among fisherwomen

Fisherwomen across the Moluccas, including *jibu-jibu* (fish processors and vendors), embody a lived feminist economic theology grounded in struggle, care and spiritual devotion. Their daily labour reflects what Ivone Gebara (1999) describes as theology born from marginalised women's everyday experiences. Through practices like praying before selling fish or observing traditional taboos, these women perform a spirituality of work – often without formal recognition. This echoes Nancy Folbre's (2001) critique that women's unpaid and informal labour is structurally undervalued.

Their economic activities also reveal relational models that challenge patriarchal norms. In many households, responsibilities are shared – men fish while women process and market the catch. This egalitarian ethos resonates with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's (1993) concept of partnership

and connects to ecofeminist principles when women engage in sustainable seaweed farming and resource care (Ruether 1992). Such praxis reflects not only survival strategies but also a moral economy grounded in justice and reciprocity.

At the community level, fisherwomen practise what Letty Russell (1993) calls an 'economy of grace', where mutual care, resource-sharing and interest-free loans defy capitalist individualism. This supports real-life freedoms in line with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1999). Their quiet defiance – persisting in work despite taboos, raising daughters to be independent – manifests what Kwok Pui-lan (2000) terms theological resistance. Nancy Fraser's (1997) dual call for recognition and redistribution is embodied here: fisherwomen challenge cultural and economic exclusion simultaneously.

Yet these liberative expressions remain constrained without institutional support. The Church in the Moluccas has at times reinforced patriarchal norms, but it also holds potential to affirm women's theological agency. Gender-inclusive liturgies and ecclesial reforms could align with Asian feminist theologies that prioritise justice, context and communal transformation (Kanyoro 2002; Kyung 1990). In this light, feminist economic theology is not only a descriptive tool but a normative call – inviting churches and communities to affirm women's embodied wisdom as vital to economic and spiritual renewal.

Theological–pastoral responses to gender and economic justice

Building on the lived theological praxis of fisherwomen, churches in the Moluccas are called to respond both pastorally and prophetically. Two interconnected strategies can effectively advance gender justice and economic dignity:

Liturgy and institutional reform: A gender-inclusive liturgy integrates biblical narratives that highlight women's roles, such as Lydia (Ac 16), the widow of Zarephath (1 Ki 17) and the women at Jesus' tomb (Lk 24). Incorporating prayers, hymns and reflections rooted in women's lived experiences aligns with Ivone Gebara's theology and Chung Hyun Kyung's Spirit-filled vision of worship. Furthermore, encouraging women to lead prayers, preach and read Scripture openly challenges the symbolic marginalisation of female voices and affirms their theological agency. Institutional transformation requires revising church policies to support women's participation in leadership, ministry and pastoral decision-making. This includes implementing gender-sensitive training in seminaries and church programmes. Additionally, adopting Musimbi Kanyoro's cultural hermeneutics invites the church to critically examine patriarchal traditions and reimagine a more egalitarian church life.

Economic advocacy and community empowerment: Supporting fisherwomen's cooperatives involves helping establish or strengthen women's groups in fish processing, marketing and seaweed cultivation through financial training, business literacy and collective savings schemes. Churches can

collaborate with local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to enhance access to capital, legal recognition (such as identity documentation for women fishers), and equitable market opportunities. Promoting economic dignity is understood as a theological mission, embodying Letty Russell's concept of an 'economy of grace' where mutual care, generosity and justice take precedence over competition. Public advocacy by the church serves to address gender-based economic disparities and campaign for structural reforms that improve coastal communities' wellbeing.

This dual approach – liturgical reform and economic advocacy – calls the church to be not only a reflective space but an agent of justice. By affirming fisherwomen's spiritual and economic contributions, the church participates in a transformative theology rooted in care, reciprocity and liberation.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of fisherwomen, including those working as *jibu-jibu*, reveal a profound theological-economic agency grounded in struggle, care and community resilience. Their daily practices articulate a feminist economic theology from below, one that is not theorised in formal ecclesiastical doctrines but enacted in concrete and embodied ways – through prayerful labour, collaborative household economies, ecological stewardship and subversive resistance to patriarchal norms.

This study affirms that theology must not only be a reflection on the divine but also a reflection from within the margins. The economic activities of these women – often overlooked by church and state – constitute sacred practices of survival and care. They express a faith that is interwoven with the rhythms of the sea, the demands of family and the pursuit of justice. In doing so, they challenge dominant theologies and economic models that remain abstract, disembodied or male-centric.

Theologically, this research invites churches, theologians and faith communities to recognise the sacramentality of women's labour, particularly in coastal and subsistence economies. It calls for a reconstruction of theological frameworks that value informal, relational and sustainable economic practices – hallmarks of a feminist theological ethic. Feminist theologians such as Ivone Gebara, Rosemary Ruether and Letty Russell provide a foundation, but the fisherwomen offer a lived theology that pushes further: contextual, embodied and defiant.

In terms of gender justice, these findings reveal the persistent structural and cultural discrimination faced by women in the fisheries sector, including exclusion from official definitions of 'fisherfolk', a lack of access to state support and societal undervaluation of their contributions. Yet, within these constraints, women cultivate alternative economies of grace, cooperation and mutual care. These practices are not merely coping mechanisms – they are transformative theological acts.

Therefore, this study contributes to feminist theology by foregrounding grassroots theological agencies and urging a

reimagining of theological economics that is just, inclusive and gender-sensitive. It also underscores the importance of policy interventions and ecological recognition that affirm and support the vital work of fisherwomen in sustaining life – economically, spiritually and communally.

Limitations of the study

This study is contextually grounded in eight coastal villages in the Moluccas and, as such, its findings may not be readily generalisable to fisherfolk in other regions of Indonesia with distinct socio-cultural or ecological characteristics. While the qualitative approach employed allows for rich insights into lived experiences, it is inherently shaped by personal narratives, which may be influenced by local taboos, gendered power relations or silences surrounding women's roles.

Importantly, the research integrates both women's and men's perspectives, offering a more nuanced and dialogical understanding of gender within fishing communities. Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore a wider range of geographical and cultural contexts, which could contribute to a more comprehensive and comparative understanding of gender dynamics in coastal economies.

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Authors' contributions

M.M.A.A., J.A.T., R.I. and R.R.S. contributed to the implementation of this research and the collection of data. M.M.A.A. conceptualised the research, analysed the data and wrote the final manuscript.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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