International Journal of the Commons

Between Rights and Reality: Gendered Access and Cooperative Governance in the Gayo Coffee Commons, Indonesia

RESEARCH ARTICLES

VELLAYATI HAJAD
IKHSAN IKHSAN
NABILA HILMY ZAFIRA
SARINI VITA DEWI
IRMA PERMATA SARI

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

The Gayo Highlands in Indonesia are internationally recognized for premium Arabica coffee production; however, women coffee farmers continue to experience unequal access to land, cooperative governance, and economic opportunities. Using Ribot and Peluso's access theory, this study examines the gap between formal rights and women's substantive ability to benefit economically, institutionally, and politically from coffee-related resources, including land ownership, cooperative participation, certification systems, and market opportunities. Semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis with women farmers, cooperative leaders, and government officials reveal that exclusion is produced through interacting legal-regulatory, structural-economic, relational, and agency-based mechanisms rather than through explicit legal prohibition alone. These mechanisms restrict women's leadership opportunities, decision-making authority, institutional recognition, and economic benefits within coffee governance. The findings further demonstrate that women's experiences are differentiated across social positions and negotiated through everyday forms of agency and informal networks. The study contributes to debates on commons governance by showing that reducing the gap between rights and reality requires not only expanding women's participation but also transforming institutional recognition, strengthening collective capacity, and promoting more gender-responsive and inclusive cooperative governance.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Ikhsan Ikhsan
Universitas Teuku Umar, ID
ikhsan.baharudin@utu.ac.id

KEYWORDS:
Gayo Coffee; Gendered Access; Commons Governance; Ribot and Peluso's Access Theory; Women Coffee Farmers

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Hajad, V., Ikhsan, I., Zafira, N. H., Dewi, S. V., & Sari, I. P. (2026). Between Rights and Reality: Gendered Access and Cooperative Governance in the Gayo Coffee Commons, Indonesia. *International Journal of the Commons*, 20(1), pp. 611–629. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1673

INTRODUCTION

Questions of equity in commons governance have long attracted attention within studies of community resource management. Classical commons scholarship, particularly Ostrom's (1990) work and its later refinements (Cox et al., 2010), emphasizes institutional arrangements, collective rules, and governance mechanisms that sustain cooperation and resource management over time. However, a growing body of research demonstrates that commons governance is not socially neutral. Even where institutions appear participatory and inclusive, access to authority, decision-making, and material benefits is often distributed unevenly across social groups. Gender remains one of the most persistent dimensions of inequality, particularly in agrarian systems where women contribute substantially to production but continue to face exclusion from land ownership, leadership, and economic control.

Feminist political ecology perspectives further challenge the assumption that access to resources can be understood solely through formal rights or institutional membership. Instead, access is shaped through everyday negotiations, power relations, social expectations, unequal labour relations, stigma, fear of social sanctions, aspirations for social mobility and recognition, and broader structures embedded within households, markets, and community institutions. From this perspective, commons are not merely collectively managed resources, but socially differentiated arenas in which recognition, authority, and opportunities are unevenly distributed. Women's experiences within agrarian commons therefore cannot be treated as homogeneous, since access is mediated by intersecting factors such as marital status, education, land ownership, age, and social position within local institutions.

These dynamics are particularly visible in Indonesia's agrarian sector. Although national policies such as the 1960 Basic Agrarian Law and gender mainstreaming initiatives formally recognize equality between men and women, women farmers continue to encounter barriers in land tenure, agricultural extension services, financial access, and participation in producer organizations. In practice, women's participation is frequently mediated through male household members, patronage networks, and bureaucratic procedures that privilege formal land ownership and male authority. As a result, formal rights—and, for some women, formal cooperative membership—do not necessarily translate into substantive access to resources, institutional influence, or economic benefits.

To examine these tensions, this study employs Ribot and Peluso's access theory (2003), which defines access not simply as legal ownership but as women's ability to derive economic, institutional, and political benefits from coffee-related resources, including land, cooperative participation, certification systems, market opportunities, and decision-making processes. While Ostrom's commons framework emphasizes institutional arrangements and rules-in-use, Ribot and Peluso extend this discussion by highlighting how unequal social relations shape differentiated abilities to benefit from resources. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Gayo coffee sector, where local governance intersects with certification regimes, export markets, and gendered divisions of labour, often positioning women as central contributors to production while limiting their influence over leadership, market control, and institutional decision-making.

The Gayo Highlands of Aceh, Indonesia, provide an important setting for exploring these issues. Internationally recognized for premium Arabica coffee production, the region is deeply integrated into cooperative institutions, certification systems, and export-oriented commodity chains. Yet women coffee farmers continue to experience barriers in land ownership, cooperative participation, market access, and institutional representation (Hajad et al., 2025; Ikhsan et al., 2024). These exclusions are further shaped by Aceh's legal pluralism, where statutory regulations interact with customary institutions such as ureung tuha and mukim, alongside Sharia-based governance structures that frequently reinforce male authority in inheritance, land tenure, and public decision-making.

Importantly, women's experiences in the Gayo Highlands are far from uniform. Widows, married women, women without formal land certificates, and younger digitally literate women often encounter different forms of opportunity and exclusion. Widows and women lacking legal land ownership, for example, frequently face greater obstacles in accessing cooperative membership, credit schemes, and institutional support. Meanwhile, younger women with higher levels of education and digital familiarity may possess greater opportunities to engage with online markets and information networks, although these opportunities remain constrained by patriarchal institutional environments (Hajad & Ikhsan, 2024). Many women also rely on informal solidarity networks such as *pengajian* (religious study circles), *arisan* (rotating savings groups), and local women's associations to exchange information, negotiate participation, and strengthen collective support within male-dominated governance structures.

This article has three primary objectives. First, it examines the gap between women's formal rights and their substantive access to coffee-related resources and benefits in the Gayo Highlands, including land ownership, cooperative membership, market participation, decision-making authority, and income-generating opportunities

across the coffee value chain. Second, it contributes to theoretical debates on gendered commons governance by analyzing how structural, relational, and agency-based mechanisms shape unequal access and participation in coffee cooperatives and export-oriented agrarian commodity systems. Third, it identifies institutional reforms and governance strategies that may strengthen women's participation, bargaining power, leadership, and economic inclusion in coffee cooperatives and rural institutions.

Using a qualitative case study approach based on semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis, this study contributes to broader discussions on commons governance, feminist political ecology, and gendered resource access while offering insights for more inclusive agrarian governance in Indonesia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ACCESS, GOVERNANCE, AND GENDERED EXCLUSION IN COFFEE COMMONS

COFFEE COMMONS, COOPERATIVE GOVERNANCE, AND GENDERED PARTICIPATION

In commons governance scholarship, the term *commons* refers to resources collectively governed through formal institutions, informal norms, and shared systems of authority that regulate access, participation, and benefit distribution (McCay & Jentoft, 1998; Ostrom, 1990). Rather than representing open and unregulated resources, commons governance emphasizes how collective arrangements organize decision-making, define membership, and determine who is able to participate and benefit. In the Gayo Highlands of Aceh, Indonesia, coffee production is predominantly organized through smallholder farming households, while downstream activities, including post-harvest processing, certification, marketing, and export coordination, are coordinated through cooperatives and producer organizations. These institutions function not only as economic intermediaries but also as governance mechanisms that structure participation and mediate access across the coffee value chain.

Within this governance arrangement, participation becomes a central mechanism through which economic opportunities, institutional authority, and access to benefits are distributed among actors involved in coffee production and commercialization. Cooperative organizations are expected to facilitate collective action, strengthen bargaining capacity, improve market access, and support compliance with international quality and certification requirements (Bijman, 2016). However, participation in cooperative governance extends beyond formal membership. It also determines who gains access to information, who influences collective decisions, and whose interests become institutionally represented within the coffee commons.

However, participation within coffee commons governance cannot be assumed to operate in socially neutral ways. Although cooperatives are frequently portrayed as participatory and inclusive institutions, opportunities to engage in decision-making, influence governance processes, and access economic benefits remain unevenly distributed through internal hierarchies and unequal power relations. Studies of agrarian commodity systems consistently show that participation often reflects existing social structures rather than eliminating them. Individuals who possess stronger institutional recognition, economic resources, and social legitimacy are generally better positioned to shape governance outcomes and capture benefits generated through collective arrangements.

These governance dynamics are particularly visible in relation to women's participation. Across agrifood value chains, women contribute substantially to agricultural production while remaining underrepresented in leadership positions, financial control, and institutional decision-making. Their labour is frequently undervalued, informalized, or concentrated in unpaid and low-recognition activities, whereas men's contributions are more visible, institutionally recognized, and economically rewarded (Jha et al., 2011; Rosenberg et al., 2018). Consequently, formal participation does not necessarily translate into equal influence, recognition, or access to economic opportunities.

Similar patterns can be observed in the Gayo coffee sector. Women participate extensively in planting, harvesting, sorting, drying, and post-harvest handling, yet these contributions are often interpreted as extensions of household labour rather than productive and economically recognized work. As a result, women remain underrepresented in cooperative leadership, contract negotiations, certification processes, and other strategic domains of coffee governance. Even when formally included as cooperative members, women's participation is frequently mediated through husbands or male household representatives, limiting their ability to transform participation into institutional influence and meaningful access to governance outcomes (Dohmwirth & Hanisch, 2019; Hansen & Asmild, 2023; Wijers, 2019).

From a feminist political ecology perspective, these inequalities cannot be explained solely through institutional design or formal membership rules. Access to resources and participation in governance are shaped through everyday power relations, social expectations, gendered labour divisions, and unequal recognition within households and community institutions. From this perspective, coffee commons governance is not merely

a system for organizing collective production but also a mechanism through which participation, authority, and benefits are unevenly negotiated and distributed. Women's experiences within coffee cooperatives therefore cannot be treated as homogeneous. Differences in marital status, land ownership, education, age, and digital literacy produce unequal capacities to participate in governance processes and convert participation into economic opportunities.

Several interconnected barriers continue to limit women's participation across coffee cooperatives and commodity governance structures (Agarwal, 2001; Stoian et al., 2018). Women frequently encounter unequal access to land ownership, financial capital, agricultural technologies, and market networks (Farnworth et al., 2020; Hajad, 2024; Ragasa et al., 2026). The combination of productive and reproductive responsibilities often restricts time and mobility for participation in collective activities and public decision-making (Imron & Satrya, 2019; Lyon et al., 2017; Martial et al., 2023; Williams, 2022). In addition, decision-making authority commonly remains concentrated in male hands, while patriarchal expectations discourage women from assuming leadership roles or speaking publicly within collective forums (Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Nightingale, 2011; Rocheleau et al., 2013; Simon & Hasan, 2025).

In some cases, women also navigate participation under conditions shaped by fear of social criticism, reputational stigma, and the risk of exclusion from community networks when challenging established gender norms (Jóhannesdóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2023; Sultana et al., 2021). These overlapping constraints demonstrate that participation in coffee commons does not automatically produce equitable access. Instead, governance processes may reproduce unequal gender relations unless institutional participation is accompanied by broader transformations in recognition, authority, and access to benefits.

RIBOT AND PELUSO'S ACCESS THEORY AND MECHANISMS OF GENDERED EXCLUSION

Ribot and Peluso's access theory (2003) provides an important analytical framework for understanding how access is produced, negotiated, and unequally distributed through institutional and social mechanisms. Rather than defining access solely through legal ownership or recognized membership, the framework conceptualizes access as the broader ability of individuals and groups to derive benefits from resources. This distinction is particularly important in agrarian contexts such as Indonesia, where women may formally possess rights to land, cooperative participation, or agricultural programs yet continue to experience exclusion from meaningful decision-making, market opportunities, and benefit distribution. From this perspective, exclusion should not be understood simply as the absence of rights but as the unequal ability to transform rights into effective participation and access to benefits.

While Ostrom's work emphasizes institutional arrangements and rules-in-use within commons governance (Ostrom, 1990), Ribot and Peluso shift attention toward the mechanisms through which unequal access is produced and reproduced. Access is therefore not determined solely by institutional membership or formal rights but also by structural inequalities, social relations, and the unequal distribution of authority, knowledge, and economic power. This distinction is particularly important for understanding why formal participation in commons governance may coexist with persistent forms of exclusion. Individuals may be institutionally included while remaining unable to influence decisions, access resources, or derive equivalent benefits from governance arrangements. Accordingly, this study distinguishes between formal rights, formal cooperative membership, participation mediated through household representatives, and substantive access to institutional influence and economic benefits.

Feminist political ecology perspectives further strengthen this approach by demonstrating that access is continuously negotiated through everyday gender relations, social expectations, labour divisions, stigma, and unequal recognition within households and community institutions (Elmhirst, 2011; Rocheleau et al., 2013). From this perspective, commons governance cannot be treated as gender-neutral because access to authority, participation, and benefits is socially differentiated and may generate systematic forms of exclusion across intersecting identities including gender, class, age, marital status, education, and land ownership. Gendered exclusion therefore emerges not merely through explicit institutional barriers but through cumulative processes that shape whose labour becomes visible, whose knowledge becomes legitimate, and whose participation becomes institutionally recognized.

Although access theory has been widely applied in studies of forestry, land tenure, and natural resource governance, its application to high-value agricultural commodity systems such as coffee remains relatively limited. This gap is particularly significant because contemporary coffee production is governed not only through national legal frameworks but also through international certification regimes, transnational value chains, export markets, and cooperative institutions that frequently reproduce unequal forms of participation. Applying access theory to the Gayo coffee sector therefore helps explain how multiple institutional arrangements interact to generate differentiated capacities for participation and produce gendered patterns of exclusion within commodity governance systems.

Building on Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access, this study organizes the mechanisms shaping women's access into four interconnected analytical dimensions: legal-regulatory, structural-economic, relational, and agency-based mechanisms. First, legal and regulatory mechanisms include cooperative bylaws, land tenure systems, inheritance arrangements, and certification procedures that formally govern participation and benefit distribution. Although these mechanisms may appear neutral, their implementation frequently disadvantages women through unequal recognition of land ownership and restricted institutional visibility. Second, structural and economic mechanisms refer to unequal access to financial capital, productive assets, agricultural technologies, extension services, and market networks that shape women's ability to engage independently within commodity systems.

Third, relational mechanisms refer to social norms, patronage relations, gender expectations, and male-dominated leadership structures that regulate the circulation of information, authority, and opportunities within cooperative institutions. Women's exclusion is often reinforced not only through formal restrictions but also through fear of social criticism, reputational stigma, and cultural expectations discouraging women from speaking publicly or assuming leadership roles. Fourth, agency-based mechanisms concern the individual and collective capacities that shape women's ability to negotiate access, including legal literacy, technical knowledge, mobility, bargaining capacity, and participation in solidarity networks. Women's experiences therefore cannot be treated as homogeneous because differences in marital status, education, land ownership, institutional connectivity, and digital literacy generate unequal capacities to participate and benefit from governance processes.

Women coffee producers in the Gayo Highlands frequently experience these mechanisms simultaneously. Although cooperative regulations do not explicitly prohibit women from becoming members, customary inheritance practices and Sharia-influenced social norms often restrict women's access to land ownership, thereby limiting eligibility for leadership positions and institutional representation. Structural exclusion from financial institutions, agricultural extension programs, and market networks further increases women's dependence on male intermediaries and external actors. At the relational level, women's voices remain underrepresented in cooperative meetings and public decision-making spaces dominated by male leadership. Agency-related constraints, including limited legal literacy, restricted mobility, and unequal bargaining power, further reduce women's capacity to challenge exclusionary institutional arrangements. These mechanisms do not operate independently but reinforce one another, creating cumulative forms of exclusion that limit women's ability to convert participation into institutional influence and economic benefit.

This framework demonstrates that formal participation alone does not eliminate unequal outcomes. Gendered exclusion persists when legal recognition coexists with structural dependency, unequal authority, and limited capacity to negotiate access. While commons governance approaches contribute important insights regarding institutional sustainability and collective action, access theory reveals how formal rights or institutional membership may coexist with substantive exclusion when underlying inequalities remain unresolved (Coles & Mitchell, 2011; Niumai, 2025; Suheera & Wazeema, 2025). In the context of the Gayo coffee sector, governance arrangements designed to improve productivity and market competitiveness may simultaneously intensify women's unpaid labour burdens while limiting their control over economic benefits and institutional decision-making.

Consequently, improving women's participation in coffee commons requires interventions across interconnected legal, structural, relational, and agency-based mechanisms (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates how women's access and exclusion within the Gayo coffee commons emerge through interconnected governance mechanisms rather than isolated institutional barriers. Unequal institutional recognition of women's land rights may reinforce their structural dependence on male intermediaries, while patriarchal social norms simultaneously constrain participation in cooperative governance and public decision-making. These interacting mechanisms produce cumulative inequalities that extend beyond formal rights and shape women's actual capacity to derive benefits from collective resource governance. The figure therefore demonstrates that closing the gap between formal rights and substantive access requires simultaneous transformation across legal, structural, relational, and agency-based dimensions rather than isolated institutional reform.

STUDY DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine gendered access, cooperative governance, and institutional exclusion within the Gayo coffee sector in Aceh, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to understand how women experience, negotiate, and interpret access to resources,

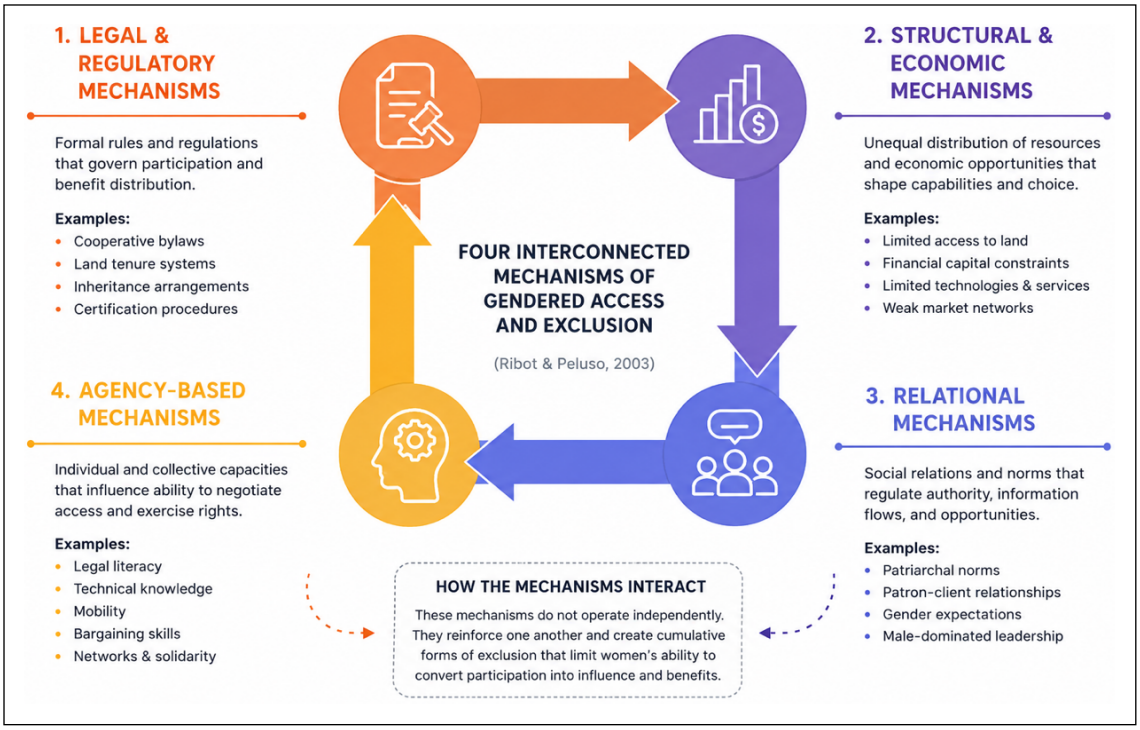

Figure 1 Four interconnected mechanisms of gendered access and exclusion. Sources: Adapted from Ribot and Peluso (2003).

participation, and decision-making within everyday social and institutional contexts. Rather than conceptualizing access solely as formal entitlement or legal recognition, this study approaches access as a socially differentiated process shaped by unequal power relations, social expectations, relational networks, reputational concerns, and unequal capacities to convert institutional membership into meaningful participation and benefits.

This methodological orientation is informed by feminist political ecology and intersectional approaches, which emphasize that access to resources and participation in governance institutions are neither neutral nor uniformly experienced across social groups. Women's experiences within agricultural governance are understood as being shaped by overlapping dimensions of gender, household position, land ownership, generation, education, and institutional status that produce uneven opportunities and constraints.

A qualitative case study design is particularly appropriate for examining these complex and context-dependent processes because it enables exploration of how formal governance arrangements intersect with local norms, everyday practices, and unequal power structures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 1992). This design also allows deeper examination of women's lived experiences and everyday negotiations that are often difficult to capture through quantitative indicators of participation or institutional membership alone.

STUDY SITE AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Fieldwork was conducted between January and April 2025 across several coffee-producing areas in the Gayo Highlands, Aceh Province, Indonesia. The research sites were selected because of their strategic role within Indonesia's coffee production system and their active involvement in cooperative governance, certification initiatives, and community-based agricultural institutions. These settings provided an appropriate context for examining how institutional arrangements shape differentiated experiences of access, participation, and exclusion.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in coffee production, cooperative governance, agricultural policy implementation, market relations, and community institutions associated with gender and resource access. Selection criteria included institutional position, gender representation, relevance to the research objectives, and voluntary participation. To avoid treating women as a homogeneous category, participant selection intentionally reflected variation in marital status, land ownership status, cooperative membership, educational background, age, and digital literacy. This strategy enabled the study to capture differentiated experiences of participation, bargaining power, and institutional access across multiple social positions and governance contexts.

Although participation was voluntary, not all individuals approached agreed to take part in the study. A small

number of prospective participants declined due to time constraints, limited availability during the harvest period, or reluctance to discuss sensitive issues related to land ownership, inheritance, and household decision-making. No personal information was collected from individuals who declined participation. To preserve variation across stakeholder groups, additional participants with comparable institutional backgrounds were recruited through the same purposive sampling strategy.

A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of stakeholders, including women and men coffee farmers, cooperative leaders, government officials, NGO representatives, traditional leaders, coffee traders and exporters, academics, and local journalists (see Table 1). Including actors from different institutional and social positions allowed the study to capture both formal governance perspectives and everyday experiences through which access and exclusion are produced and negotiated.

Across participant groups, additional attention was given to variations within the Gayo Highlands, including differences in cooperative contexts, leadership arrangements, land ownership status, marital status, educational background, age, and institutional connectivity. This strategy enabled the study to capture how women's experiences of participation, bargaining power, and access differed across governance settings and social positions within the same regional context. These distinctions were incorporated to reflect an intersectional perspective that understands women's access and participation as differentiated and shaped by multiple identities and institutional conditions.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through three complementary techniques, semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis, to capture multiple dimensions of women's access, governance experiences, and institutional participation within the Gayo coffee sector. Combining these methods enabled the study to examine not only formal governance arrangements but also everyday practices and social relations that shape unequal access and participation.

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions regarding land ownership, cooperative participation, labour division, market access, institutional inclusion, and decision-making processes. Particular attention was given to understanding how women negotiated structural barriers, social expectations, reputational stigma, fear of exclusion from community networks, and everyday forms of marginalization within cooperative governance. Interviews also examined different forms of agency and resistance, including household bargaining, informal networking, selective participation, mutual support arrangements, and collective efforts to strengthen women's involvement in institutional processes.

PARTICIPANT CATEGORY	CODE	TOTAL (n)	GENDER BREAKDOWN	POSITION/AFFILIATION	ANALYTICAL CONTRIBUTION
Individual Women Farmers	WF01–WF07	7	Women (n = 7)	Individual farmers	Women's lived experiences, differentiated access, and everyday negotiation
Individual Men Farmers	MF01–MF05	5	Men (n = 5)	Individual farmers	Labour relations, governance practices, and resource control
Cooperative Leaders	CL01–CL04	4	Women (n = 1); Men (n = 3)	Cooperative boards	Institutional governance and participation mechanisms
Local Government Officials	GO01–GO04	4	Women (n = 1); Men (n = 3)	Agriculture and trade offices	Policy implementation and institutional context
NGO Representatives	NGO01	1	Women (n = 1)	Rural development NGO	Community empowerment and inclusion perspectives
Traditional/ Community Elders	TE01–TE03	3	Men (n = 3)	Village councils, adat leaders	Informal norms and socio-cultural governance
Coffee Traders/ Exporters	TR01–TR04	4	Women (n = 1); Men (n = 3)	Market actors	Market access and commodity governance
Academic Experts/ Journalists	AJ01–AJ02	2	Women (n = 1); Men (n = 1)	Universities and local media	Public discourse and sector interpretation
Total		30	Women (n = 11); Men (n = 19)		

Table 1 Informant categories, number, and thematic contribution. Sources: Processed by authors (2025).

Field observations complemented interview findings by documenting farming activities, cooperative meetings, market interactions, and community discussions. Observation focused not only on visible participation but also on interactional dynamics and everyday governance practices, including speaking patterns, informal negotiations, spatial arrangements, labour allocation, and gendered expectations surrounding authority and public participation. In several cases, observations revealed women's reluctance to speak publicly despite active engagement in coffee production, reflecting broader concerns related to social expectations, reputational risk, and male-dominated institutional environments.

Document analysis was conducted using cooperative reports, government regulations, NGO publications, certification documents, media coverage, and previous academic studies related to coffee governance and gender issues in Aceh. These materials were used to contextualize interview findings and examine how institutional narratives concerning participation, productivity, leadership, and inclusion were constructed across governance settings. Comparing documentary sources with field evidence enabled a deeper understanding of the relationship between formal institutional discourse and women's lived experiences in everyday agricultural governance.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Miles et al. (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The coding process combined deductive categories derived from Ribot and Peluso's access theory with inductive themes emerging from participants' narratives, field observations, and documentary evidence. This analytical approach allowed theoretical concepts of access to remain responsive to contextual meanings and empirical variation identified throughout the research process.

An intersectional analytical lens was applied throughout coding to examine how overlapping social positions, including gender, marital status, land ownership, generation, educational background, and institutional membership, shaped differentiated experiences of access, exclusion, and agency. Particular attention was given to identifying relational mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, everyday forms of resistance, and forms of collective agency operating within and beyond formal cooperative structures. NVivo software was used to support data management, organize coding categories, identify recurring patterns, and facilitate interpretation of relationships among governance arrangements, access mechanisms, gendered barriers, and women's strategies of negotiation.

RESEARCH QUALITY, ETHICS, AND REFLEXIVITY

Several strategies were employed to ensure the credibility, rigor, and trustworthiness of the research process. Methodological triangulation was applied by integrating semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis to strengthen analytical consistency and support interpretation across multiple forms of evidence. To enhance interpretive credibility, member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate emerging findings and reduce the risk of misrepresenting participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations were integrated throughout all stages of the study through informed consent, confidentiality protection, anonymity, and sensitivity toward local cultural norms during field engagement. Recognizing that qualitative knowledge is co-produced through researcher–participant interaction, reflexive field notes were maintained to document researcher positionality, emerging interpretations, and potential influences on data collection and analysis. A dialogical and participatory approach was also adopted to minimize hierarchical relationships and encourage more open discussion of gender-sensitive experiences and everyday forms of negotiation within cooperative governance contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

GENDERED ACCESS MECHANISM

Women's participation in the coffee sector of the Gayo Highlands, Aceh, cannot be adequately understood through formal indicators such as land ownership or cooperative membership alone. Drawing on Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access, this study conceptualizes access as the ability to derive benefits from resources through multiple and interconnected mechanisms that extend beyond formal legal entitlement. Women's opportunities to participate in coffee production and governance are shaped by legal-regulatory arrangements, structural-economic conditions, relational power dynamics, and everyday forms of agency that together determine access to land, finance, technology, certification systems, and decision-making processes.

In Aceh, these mechanisms operate within a layered governance environment shaped by interactions between statutory regulation, customary institutions, and Sharia-based governance. Rather than functioning independently, these institutional arrangements collectively shape how legitimacy, ownership, leadership, and participation are interpreted and enacted within agricultural settings. Consequently, women's access depends not only on formal rights but also on social recognition and locally accepted

norms that determine who is considered a legitimate resource holder and decision-making actor.

This perspective suggests that gendered access should be understood as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a fixed institutional outcome. Women's ability to participate and benefit from the coffee economy emerges through continuous interaction among institutional rules, household relations, community expectations, and individual strategies of adaptation and resistance. To examine these dynamics more systematically, the following subsections analyse four interconnected mechanisms shaping women's participation in the Gayo coffee sector: (1) legal and regulatory access; (2) structural and economic access; (3) relational access; and (4) agency-based access through which women navigate, negotiate, and respond to exclusion.

Legal and regulatory access

Legal and regulatory arrangements provide the formal institutional framework governing women's involvement in Indonesian agriculture, including the coffee economy of the Gayo Highlands. At the national level, Indonesia's Basic Agrarian Law of 1960 (*Undang-Undang Pokok Agraria*, UUPA) formally guarantees equal rights for women and men to acquire, own, and benefit from land. Cooperative regulations similarly adopt gender-neutral membership principles that position women as legitimate agricultural actors and provide equal opportunities to participate in agrarian production and collective economic institutions.

However, formal legal recognition does not necessarily translate into substantive access. National evidence indicates a persistent gap between legal entitlement and actual control over productive resources. Although Indonesia formally recognizes equal land rights, only approximately 24.2% of titled land is registered under women's names, suggesting that ownership and institutional recognition remain unevenly distributed. Administrative procedures continue to privilege male household representation, while institutional mechanisms supporting joint ownership remain limited. Consequently, legal equality frequently coexists with institutional arrangements that continue to position men as primary holders of land, authority, and economic legitimacy.

These dynamics become more visible in Aceh, where statutory regulation operates within a layered governance environment shaped by interactions between customary institutions and Sharia-based governance. Importantly, Islamic inheritance principles formally recognize women's rights to inherit property through differentiated inheritance provisions. However, in practice, implementation often occurs through localized customary arrangements and socially embedded interpretations of religious and community authority. Rather than functioning independently, these institutional arrangements collectively shape how land ownership, inheritance, leadership, and participation are interpreted in agricultural settings. As a result, women's access is influenced less by formal religious principles themselves than by the institutional processes through which legitimacy and land ownership are socially recognized.

This layered governance structure is particularly visible in local land arrangements such as Hak Langgeh, institutionalized through Aceh Qanun No. 9 of 2008. Although introduced to regulate land transactions and preserve community interests, implementation frequently depends on local adjudication processes influenced by customary authority and localized interpretations of inheritance and social legitimacy. Under these conditions, women's inheritance claims and land ownership rights are not determined solely through statutory provisions or formal religious rules but are negotiated within broader systems of social recognition and institutional authority.

Within this socio-legal environment, men are more frequently recognized as household representatives, principal landholders, and legitimate actors within village governance and cooperative institutions. Land certificates, cooperative registration procedures, and legal identity operate as institutional filters that shape whose participation becomes visible and whose remains excluded. Women may possess formal legal standing yet continue to face limitations in transforming those rights into effective authority over land management, certification procedures, market participation, and cooperative governance.

From a feminist political ecology perspective, these findings suggest that legal-regulatory access should not be understood simply as the formal allocation of rights but as a socially embedded process through which recognition, legitimacy, and authority are unevenly produced and distributed. Women's exclusion in the Gayo coffee sector emerges less through explicit legal prohibition than through the cumulative interaction of state regulation, customary governance, and religiously informed expectations regarding appropriate social roles. These governance arrangements shape more than land ownership alone; they influence whose labour becomes economically visible, whose agricultural knowledge is recognized, and whose participation becomes institutionally meaningful.

Although women contribute extensively throughout coffee production, including planting, harvesting, sorting, drying, and household-based post-harvest processing, such activities are frequently interpreted as extensions of domestic responsibility rather than recognized agricultural labour. Consequently, women's contributions do not necessarily translate into authority over land registration,

cooperative representation, certification procedures, or strategic market decisions. In this context, legal-regulatory access becomes less a question of formal rights alone and more a question of whether women are able to convert legal recognition into institutional legitimacy, bargaining power, and meaningful access to benefits generated within the coffee economy.

Interview findings illustrate how these institutional arrangements operate in practice. One woman farmer explained: "Inheritance of land here is more commonly given to men. I have attempted to claim my share of the inheritance, but customary courts usually prioritize male siblings in their decisions" (Interview, WF05). This account should not be interpreted as reflecting Islamic inheritance principles themselves but rather the localized institutional practices and socially embedded interpretations through which inheritance claims are evaluated and implemented. The findings suggest that women's exclusion emerges less through explicit legal denial than through differentiated forms of institutional recognition that shape whose claims are considered legitimate and actionable. Access to land therefore depended not only on formal entitlement but also on the social and institutional recognition produced through local governance arrangements.

A similar pattern appeared in women's experiences of cooperative participation. Another participant stated:

> "I manage the coffee farm every day, but the land certificate is under my husband's name. To join the cooperative, the certificate must be in my name, which I do not have, so I have to use my husband's name. Although I attend cooperative meetings, I am never included in important decision-making discussions." (Interview, WF03)

This finding demonstrates that participation is mediated not merely through administrative procedures but through broader systems of recognition and authority. Institutional legitimacy continues to privilege land ownership over labour contribution as a basis for recognition, limiting women's visibility within cooperative governance despite their active involvement in production.

Interview evidence further suggests that women's limited participation should not be interpreted as passive acceptance of existing arrangements. Several participants described silence, selective participation, and indirect negotiation as practical responses to anticipated social consequences and reputational pressures rather than agreement with prevailing norms. Fear therefore operates as an informal mechanism of governance, shaping whether women claim inheritance rights, register land independently, or engage actively in institutional decision-making. Concerns over household conflict, social legitimacy, and community expectations frequently encourage women to negotiate access indirectly rather than openly contest institutional authority.

Importantly, these experiences were not uniform across women. Gendered exclusion operated intersectionally through differences in marital status, land ownership, educational background, age, and institutional connectivity, producing unequal capacities to transform labour into authority and economic benefit. Widowed women more frequently experienced exclusion through insecure tenure arrangements, while married women often remained institutionally represented through husbands. Women without land certificates encountered barriers to cooperative participation and formal recognition, whereas younger and digitally connected women sometimes developed alternative pathways through information access and emerging market opportunities.

Variation also emerged across cooperative contexts within the Gayo Highlands. Differences in leadership structures, institutional arrangements, certification engagement, and participation opportunities produced uneven experiences of access and influence among women. Women involved in cooperatives with stronger female leadership or more participatory governance reported greater institutional visibility and leadership opportunities, whereas women in cooperatives with more male-dominated leadership arrangements remained more dependent on formal membership and land ownership requirements for institutional recognition and participation.

At the same time, women responded to these constraints through forms of everyday resistance and negotiated participation, including household bargaining, informal information networks, religious gatherings, and digital communication channels. Rather than directly confronting institutional authority, these strategies allowed women to maintain participation while gradually expanding access within existing governance structures. Consequently, legal-regulatory access in the Gayo coffee sector should be understood not simply in terms of whether women possess formal rights, but in terms of their unequal ability to transform legal recognition into institutional legitimacy, bargaining power, and meaningful access to resources.

Structural and economic access

Despite formal national recognition of women's rights to land ownership and cooperative participation, structural and economic barriers continue to constrain their ability to exercise these rights in the Gayo coffee sector. These barriers are embedded in unequal access to productive resources, financial systems, bureaucratic procedures, and market structures that reproduce gendered exclusion.

First, unequal land distribution and insecure land tenure remain major structural barriers limiting women's access to formal economic institutions. Widows and women without formal land certificates are frequently excluded from cooperative membership and access to credit because collateral requirements are generally linked to documented land ownership, which remains predominantly controlled by men. In the absence of formal land ownership documents, women often cannot meet administrative requirements for formal loans, credit facilities, subsidies, or cooperative membership. Consequently, financial institutions and certification systems tend to recognize men as the primary borrowers and holders of productive capital, reinforcing women's dependency on husbands, male relatives, or local intermediaries.

One widow explained: "I manage the coffee plot and take care of harvesting, but because the land certificate is under my late husband's family, I cannot apply for cooperative loans myself. Usually, I ask my brother or another male relative to represent me." (Interview, WF04). This situation demonstrates that legal recognition alone does not necessarily translate into substantive access. Women may participate actively in production while remaining institutionally invisible within systems that prioritize formal land ownership and male authority.

Second, unequal access to productive resources and agricultural inputs constrains women's economic opportunities and asset accumulation. Women in Gayo commonly face difficulties accessing improved seeds, fertilizers, irrigation infrastructure, mechanization, and transport. Their participation is concentrated largely in labour-intensive activities such as harvesting, sorting, and post-harvest processing, while men are more frequently involved in trading, certification, processing management, and export relations.

Over time, this unequal distribution of productive roles reinforces gendered labour segmentation and reduces women's opportunities for economic advancement. As one woman farmer stated: "Women usually handle harvesting and sorting, but when there are meetings about pricing or certification, men are the ones invited. We work in the field but rarely participate in decisions." (Interview, WF02). This division illustrates how women's labour remains central to production but does not necessarily provide equal access to decision-making authority or economic benefits.

Third, bureaucratic and certification arrangements create additional barriers to women's direct participation in formal governance and market systems. Access to government support programs, international certification schemes, and export contracts commonly requires official documentation, cooperative registration, and administrative procedures that many women cannot independently fulfil. Registration processes are often time-consuming, organized at inconvenient hours, and often organized around assumptions of male ownership and household representation. As a result, women frequently participate indirectly through male household members rather than as independent economic actors.

A cooperative leader acknowledged: "Most certification documents and membership records still follow household ownership, which in practice means registration is usually completed under men's names." (Interview, CL03). These institutional arrangements reduce women's opportunities to access formal distribution channels and reinforce women's concentration in undervalued but essential production and post-harvest roles.

Fourth, these structural and economic constraints ultimately weaken women's bargaining power both within households and institutional settings. Limited access to finance, inputs, managerial roles, and market participation reduces women's influence over pricing decisions, household expenditures, and cooperative profit-sharing mechanisms. Dependence on male intermediaries for credit and certification further reinforces unequal authority relations and limits women's capacity to act as independent economic actors. A local government official noted: "Many support programs formally target households, but implementation often assumes men are the primary economic actors." (Interview, GO02). This institutional logic contributes to women's continued marginalization despite their substantial contribution to coffee production and household livelihoods.

The findings from the Gayo Highlands suggest that formal recognition of women's rights does not automatically translate into substantive access. Similar patterns have been documented elsewhere, where women with legally recognized land rights continue to face barriers to agricultural finance, productive inputs, and institutional support because of gendered assumptions embedded in financial and governance systems (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2020; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2014). The Gayo case therefore reinforces the broader argument that unequal access is reproduced not only through legal arrangements but also through institutional practices that shape who is recognized as a legitimate economic actor.

However, Gayo also presents a distinct socio-legal context. Unlike settings governed primarily through statutory regulation, Aceh combines formal state institutions with customary and Sharia-based social arrangements that often reinforce men's legitimacy as household representatives and land managers. This layered governance environment intensifies women's dependence on male intermediaries and limits their direct participation in cooperative and market systems. These findings suggest

that improving women's economic access requires more than formal legal recognition; it demands institutional changes that strengthen women's ability to convert formal rights into effective participation through improved access to credit, certification systems, productive resources, and decision-making spaces.

Relational access

Relational access refers to the ways social norms, cultural expectations, informal networks, and everyday power relations shape who is able to derive benefits from resources and who remains excluded from them. Unlike legal-regulatory or structural-economic mechanisms, relational access operates through socially embedded interactions that determine whose voice is considered legitimate, whose knowledge is recognized, and whose participation becomes institutionally meaningful. In the Gayo coffee sector, access is therefore mediated not only through formal membership or ownership but also through gendered expectations regarding authority, modesty, and appropriate public behaviour. Women's participation is consequently shaped through ongoing negotiation within households, community institutions, and cooperative governance structures.

Interview findings suggest that relational exclusion rarely appeared through explicit prohibition. Instead, women described more subtle forms of constraint rooted in reputational concerns, anticipated criticism, and social expectations surrounding public participation. Several women explained that speaking openly during cooperative meetings could be interpreted as inappropriate, confrontational, or disrespectful toward male leadership. One participant stated: "Sometimes I want to ask questions during meetings, but people may think I talk too much or challenge senior men. It feels safer to stay quiet and discuss later with other women." (Interview, WF06). This account suggests that silence should not automatically be interpreted as passivity or disengagement. Rather, selective participation often functioned as a strategic response to anticipated social consequences. Fear operated less as direct coercion and more as a relational mechanism that shaped who felt entitled to speak, negotiate, and influence collective decisions.

These dynamics become more visible within Aceh's layered governance environment, where customary authority and Sharia-informed social norms interact in shaping public legitimacy. Men were more frequently recognized as household representatives and legitimate decision-makers, while women's authority remained associated with supportive and domestic roles. As one community elder explained: "Traditionally, men usually speak for the household in village discussions. Women may participate, but major decisions are still expected to come from male family members." (Interview, TE02). This expectation did not emerge solely from formal institutional arrangements but from socially reproduced ideas regarding who should represent household interests. Relational authority therefore became embedded in everyday practices and influenced women's willingness to claim recognition within public decision-making arenas.

Relational inequalities were also reflected in cooperative governance structures. Although interview findings indicated that women participated across multiple stages of coffee production, including cultivation, harvesting, sorting, and post-harvest activities, their institutional influence remained comparatively limited. Membership was frequently mediated through husbands or male relatives, reducing women's opportunities to participate directly in agenda setting, certification processes, and benefit allocation. One woman farmer explained: "Women work from planting until sorting, but when decisions are made about prices or cooperative plans, men usually represent the family." (Interview, WF02). A cooperative leader similarly acknowledged: "Women's participation has increased, but leadership positions and strategic meetings are still mostly attended by men." (Interview, CL02). These accounts suggest that labour contribution alone did not automatically generate institutional authority. Women's participation remained recognized primarily through relational affiliation rather than through independent institutional legitimacy.

Relational dependency also extended beyond formal organizations through patron-client arrangements connecting farmers with traders, local elites, and community leaders. Access to loans, buyers, market information, and production opportunities frequently depended upon personal relationships rather than transparent institutional procedures. Women with weaker social networks therefore experienced additional barriers in negotiating prices and accessing economic opportunities. One trader noted: "Many women prefer transactions through family members because they feel more comfortable and have less direct access to buyers." (Interview, TR03). Although these networks sometimes expanded opportunities for participation, they also reproduced dependency by positioning women's access as contingent upon male intermediaries.

At the same time, women did not respond passively to relational exclusion. Interview findings showed that women actively developed informal spaces of collective support and negotiated participation through *pengajian*, *arisan*, and local women's associations. These spaces functioned not only as mechanisms of mutual assistance but also as channels for exchanging market information,

discussing labour arrangements, and strengthening confidence for participation beyond household settings. As explained by an NGO representative: "Women often become more confident to engage in cooperatives after participating in informal groups where they can discuss problems and support one another." (Interview, NGO01). These findings suggest that informal networks operated as forms of collective agency rather than merely social support. Through these networks, women gradually expanded opportunities for participation while remaining within socially accepted boundaries.

Importantly, relational experiences varied across women and were shaped by intersecting social positions. Widowed women reported stronger dependence on community approval due to insecure tenure arrangements, while married women often remained institutionally represented through husbands. Women without land certificates encountered additional barriers to cooperative recognition, whereas younger and digitally connected women appeared more likely to access alternative information channels and negotiate broader participation opportunities (Gupta & Kiran, 2025). Women participating in smaller cooperatives occasionally reported greater informal influence compared with those involved in larger and more bureaucratic organizations. These differences indicate that relational access cannot be explained by gender alone but emerges through interactions among marital status, generation, institutional position, and social connectivity.

From a feminist political ecology perspective, these findings demonstrate that relational access is not simply about interpersonal interaction but about how legitimacy and authority are socially produced and distributed. Women's responses, including silence, selective participation, household bargaining, informal networking, and collective support practices, illustrate that agency frequently emerges through negotiated and everyday forms of resistance rather than direct confrontation. Consequently, strengthening women's participation in the Gayo coffee commons requires more than institutional inclusion; it also requires transforming the relational structures through which authority, legitimacy, and recognition continue to be reproduced.

Agency-based access

Agency-based access refers to women's capacity to transform limited opportunities into meaningful participation through knowledge, negotiation, social relations, and everyday strategies. While legal-regulatory, structural-economic, and relational constraints continue to shape unequal access to land, markets, and cooperative governance, women are not passive recipients of these conditions. Drawing on Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access, agency is understood not as unrestricted individual choice but as the ability to mobilize information, networks, skills, and practical strategies to derive benefits from available resources. In the Gayo Highlands, women's agency develops within unequal institutional environments in which access remains mediated by patriarchal norms, informal authority, and differentiated opportunities for participation.

Interview findings suggest that women's agency operated through multiple and interconnected capacities, including legal literacy, technical knowledge of coffee cultivation and processing, negotiation skills, leadership confidence, physical mobility, and digital competence. These capacities influenced women's ability to engage in cooperatives, participate in household decision-making, and access opportunities within the coffee value chain. However, access to these capabilities remained uneven because training programs, extension services, and certification-related activities were frequently directed toward male household representatives or organized at times that conflicted with women's domestic responsibilities. As a result, women often relied on indirect channels to obtain information and institutional recognition.

At the household level, women commonly exercised agency through negotiation rather than direct confrontation. Several participants described efforts to secure greater visibility within cooperative systems by negotiating registration arrangements and participation opportunities with male family members. One participant explained: "I asked my husband to register both of our names in the cooperative because I wanted to join training sessions directly instead of waiting for information from others." (Interview, WF01).

This experience illustrates that participation frequently emerged through negotiated forms of access rather than formal institutional entitlement alone. Several participants also described choosing negotiation over direct confrontation to avoid household tension, reputational consequences, or perceptions of challenging established gender roles. These findings suggest that women's agency often operated through subtle and adaptive strategies rather than overt resistance.

Agency was not experienced uniformly across women. Capacities to negotiate and expand access varied according to marital status, educational background, land ownership, age, and institutional connectivity. Married women more commonly pursued access through household bargaining and negotiated participation, whereas widowed women experienced greater insecurity due to limited tenure arrangements and weaker institutional recognition. Women without land certificates often remained dependent on indirect representation through household

or cooperative structures. By contrast, younger and more digitally connected women appeared better positioned to access certification updates, market information, and alternative economic opportunities through smartphones, social media, and digital communication platforms.

One participant explained: "I learned from YouTube and WhatsApp groups about coffee processing and prices. Sometimes I know market information earlier than people in the village." (Interview, WF07). However, these advantages remained unevenly distributed and continued to be constrained by unequal land ownership, patriarchal institutional arrangements, and women's limited influence within cooperative governance. These findings demonstrate that agency is shaped not only by gender itself but also by intersecting social positions that influence recognition, bargaining power, and institutional visibility.

Women also responded collectively to exclusion through informal solidarity practices. *Pengajian*, *arisan*, and local women's associations functioned not only as spaces for social support but also as channels for exchanging market information, discussing farming practices, and building confidence to engage beyond household settings. Rather than operating as purely social activities, these networks became practical mechanisms through which women expanded participation within male-dominated institutional environments. As explained by an NGO representative: "Women who join informal groups tend to become more confident to attend meetings and speak publicly." (Interview, NGO01). These findings suggest that collective participation can partially compensate for exclusion from formal governance structures by creating alternative spaces for knowledge-sharing, social legitimacy, and collective confidence.

Agency also appeared through gradual institutional engagement rather than open resistance. A smaller but growing number of women collaborated with supportive cooperative leaders to increase participation in training activities, committee work, and governance processes. One cooperative leader noted: "When women participate directly in training and committee activities, they become more active in proposing ideas and questioning decisions." (Interview, CL01). This suggests that agency does not emerge independently of institutions but depends upon enabling environments capable of recognizing women as legitimate actors. Cooperative governance therefore influences whether women's initiatives remain individual coping strategies or evolve into broader institutional change.

Across cases, three forms of agency became particularly visible. First, individual agency emerged through household bargaining, informal learning, and strategic participation. Second, collective agency developed through solidarity networks that strengthened women's confidence and expanded access to information. Third, everyday resistance appeared through subtle practices, including selective participation, gradual negotiation, and attempts to influence cooperative decisions without directly confronting institutional authority. These forms of agency reveal that women's responses to exclusion are frequently negotiated and adaptive rather than openly oppositional.

These forms of agency did not emerge equally across institutional settings. Interview findings revealed important variation among cooperatives in terms of leadership structure, participation opportunities, and organizational support for women's involvement. Importantly, stronger women's leadership in some cooperatives did not indicate the absence of patriarchal norms, unequal land ownership, or gendered household relations. Women across the four cooperative settings continued to operate within the broader socio-cultural and institutional environment of the Gayo Highlands. Rather, the key difference lay in how cooperative-level organizational arrangements mediated these wider constraints. In cooperatives where leaders actively supported women's participation, direct involvement in training, committee activities, and governance processes created repeated opportunities for women to build knowledge, confidence, institutional visibility, and legitimacy. Over time, these forms of participation provided stronger pathways through which women could move from involvement in cooperative activities toward greater influence and leadership. Table 2 summarizes these differences and their implications for women's agency.

Because standardized gender-disaggregated training attendance records were not available across all four cooperatives, differences in women's access to training are interpreted qualitatively based on interview and observational evidence rather than presented as comparative participation rates. Nevertheless, the available evidence consistently indicates that women in cooperatives with stronger female leadership had more direct opportunities to participate in training and organizational activities.

The comparison across cooperatives suggests that women's agency was more readily translated into institutional influence where organizational environments provided stronger recognition and more direct opportunities for participation. Kopepi Ketiara and Kokowagayo illustrate this pattern most clearly. Their stronger women's leadership should not be interpreted as evidence that broader patriarchal relations or inequalities in land ownership were absent. Rather, the findings indicate that cooperative-level arrangements mediated how these wider constraints translated into institutional exclusion. Supportive leadership, direct participation in training

COOPERATIVE	WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION PROFILE	GOVERNANCE PATTERN	CERTIFICATION	ORGANIZATIONAL CONDITIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN'S AGENCY
Kopepi Ketiara	Strong women's participation and institutional visibility	Female leadership and pro-women orientation	Fair Trade, Organic	Supportive leadership and more frequently reported direct participation in training and organizational activities strengthened institutional visibility and leadership opportunities
KSU Sara Ate	Moderate participation across cooperative activities	Mixed leadership	Organic, Fair Trade	Participation opportunities existed, but women's influence remained uneven across decision-making processes
Kokowagayo	Women-centered participation model	Women-led governance	Fair Trade, Organic	Women-centered participation and stronger institutional recognition supported collective agency and pathways into governance roles
Arinagata	Relatively lower women's participation in governance processes	Mixed but predominantly male leadership	Organic, Fair Trade	Women's participation remained more concentrated in production, with fewer opportunities to influence strategic governance

Table 2 Variations in Cooperative Contexts and Implications for Women's Agency in the Gayo Highlands. Source: Processed by authors (2025).

and committee activities, and repeated involvement in organizational processes increased women's visibility and confidence while strengthening their recognition as legitimate cooperative actors. These experiences, in turn, created pathways toward greater involvement in decision-making and leadership. By contrast, in cooperatives with more male-dominated leadership arrangements, women's participation remained more concentrated in production or routine cooperative activities and was less readily translated into influence over strategic decisions.

The study did not identify evidence that women in the more women-inclusive cooperatives operated under systematically different land-rights arrangements. The variation observed across the four cooperatives therefore appears to be associated primarily with differences in organizational recognition, leadership support, and opportunities for direct institutional participation rather than with the absence of broader structural constraints.

Overall, agency-based access in the Gayo coffee commons reflects both resilience and constraint. Women negotiated access through adaptation, solidarity, informal learning, and everyday resistance, but their capacity to translate these strategies into institutional influence varied across cooperative settings. Agency should therefore be understood not as unrestricted individual choice or as a product of individual capacity alone, but as a situated and relational process whose institutional effects depend partly on whether cooperative arrangements provide recognition, organizational support, and meaningful opportunities for participation. Strengthening women's participation in commons governance consequently requires not only expanding women's presence but also creating institutional pathways through which participation can develop into recognition, decision-making influence, and leadership.

FROM FORMAL RIGHTS TO SUBSTANTIVE ACCESS

Ribot and Peluso's (2003) access theory explains why formal recognition alone did not ensure substantive access to resources and decision-making within the Gayo coffee economy. Women's exclusion stemmed not from the absence of rights, but from unequal capacities to convert legal entitlements into institutional recognition, meaningful participation, and material benefits. Access was therefore shaped not only by ownership or formal membership, but also by interacting legal, structural, relational, and agency-based mechanisms. This produced a persistent rights–access gap in which formal rights—and, for some women, formal cooperative membership—did not necessarily translate into equal influence over institutional processes or access to benefits.

Feminist political ecology further extends this interpretation by demonstrating that commons governance operates as a multi-scalar process rather than a socially neutral institutional arrangement. Access, authority, and participation were continuously produced across interconnected household, community, institutional, and market relations. Women's opportunities to benefit from land ownership, cooperative governance, certification systems, and market participation were shaped not only through formal rules but also through broader struggles over legitimacy, representation, and control over productive resources. Participation therefore functioned not simply

as institutional presence but as an unevenly distributed capacity to influence decisions and secure recognition.

At the legal-regulatory level, unequal participation emerged not from the absence of formal rights but from the institutional processes through which rights were interpreted, validated, and translated into practice. Evidence from the Gayo Highlands suggests that statutory arrangements in Aceh interacted with localized customary arrangements and socially embedded interpretations of religious and community authority, shaping whose ownership, participation, and leadership became institutionally acknowledged. Women's access therefore depended less on formal entitlement alone than on socially mediated processes through which authority and legitimacy were recognized and reproduced within governance legitimacy.

These limitations were reinforced through structural-economic mechanisms that linked participation to ownership, institutional visibility, and access to productive assets. Women's contributions to coffee production frequently did not translate into broader economic influence because participation within certification systems, financial services, market networks, and cooperative structures remained connected to forms of ownership and institutional recognition that women often lacked. Rather than excluding women from production itself, these mechanisms restricted women's ability to transform labour contributions into bargaining power and strategic influence. Similar findings in recent studies of gendered agrarian governance demonstrate that formal equality frequently coexists with institutional arrangements that continue to privilege men as economically legitimate actors and reproduce unequal opportunities for participation and resource control (Doss et al., 2018; Jost et al., 2016; Stoian et al., 2018).

Access was further shaped through relational mechanisms embedded within everyday social life. Women's participation was regulated through expectations regarding legitimacy, modesty, authority, and acceptable forms of public engagement. Participants frequently described avoiding direct confrontation not because they accepted existing arrangements but because of concerns over household conflict, reputational consequences, and exclusion from community networks. Several women described postponing disagreement, communicating indirectly, or relying on informal women's circles as strategies to preserve social legitimacy while maintaining opportunities for future participation. Although solidarity spaces such as *pengajian*, *arisan*, and local women's associations expanded confidence and access to information, they rarely replaced women's exclusion from formal arenas where authority and decision-making remained institutionally concentrated.

In this study, agency is understood as the capacity of individuals and social groups to mobilize knowledge, relationships, skills, and available resources to negotiate, adapt to, or challenge unequal structures shaping access and participation (Kabeer, 1999; Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Agency therefore does not imply unrestricted autonomy but reflects the capacity to act within existing institutional and social constraints. Yet these constraints did not eliminate women's ability to shape their participation. Agency was expressed through negotiated and situated practices that expanded opportunities for engagement without necessarily transforming the institutional structures that constrained them. Across the findings, agency appeared through three interconnected forms: individual agency through household bargaining and informal learning; collective agency through solidarity networks and shared participation; and everyday resistance through subtle efforts to influence institutional processes without directly confronting dominant authority. These practices reflected not only immediate coping strategies but also aspirations for greater recognition, stronger bargaining positions, more autonomous participation, and broader opportunities for future generations.

Women's experiences, however, were not uniform. Access and participation varied according to marital status, educational opportunities, land ownership, age, and institutional connectivity. Married women, widowed women, women without land certificates, and younger digitally connected women differed in their capacities to negotiate recognition and convert participation into influence. Experiences also varied across cooperative settings. Women in smaller cooperatives sometimes reported greater informal influence despite limited formal authority, whereas women in cooperatives with more male-dominated leadership arrangements reported more limited influence over strategic decision-making. These differences indicate that gendered exclusion was shaped by intersecting social positions rather than gender alone, producing uneven opportunities to transform participation into authority and economic benefit.

Overall, the findings indicate that movement from formal rights to substantive access depends less on expanding legal entitlement than on transforming the governance arrangements through which recognition, participation, and authority are distributed. Although women continuously negotiated access through bargaining, solidarity, informal learning, and everyday resistance, the transformative potential of these strategies remained uneven because access itself was embedded within broader institutional relations. Substantive inclusion therefore requires not only recognizing women as contributors to coffee production but also repositioning women as legitimate actors within commons governance, cooperative decision-making, and resource allocation processes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the gap between rights and reality in the Gayo coffee commons cannot be explained simply through the absence of legal rights or women's formal exclusion from cooperative institutions. Using Ribot and Peluso's (2003) access theory, the findings show that women's participation and ability to benefit from coffee governance are shaped through interacting legal-regulatory, structural-economic, relational, and agency-based mechanisms. Although women contribute substantially across coffee cultivation, post-harvest processing, and cooperative activities, formal participation did not automatically translate into institutional recognition, economic influence, or decision-making authority. Women's exclusion therefore emerged less through explicit prohibition than through cumulative governance processes that mediated who became recognized as a legitimate actor within coffee commons governance.

From a feminist political ecology perspective, the findings further reveal that access within coffee cooperative governance is not socially neutral but continuously produced across interconnected household, community, institutional, and market relations. Women's opportunities to benefit from land ownership, certification systems, cooperative participation, and market access were shaped not only through formal rules but also through socially embedded expectations regarding legitimacy, authority, and acceptable forms of participation. These findings demonstrate that commons governance should be understood not only as collective resource management but also as a process through which recognition, participation, and benefits are unevenly distributed.

Importantly, women's experiences were not homogeneous. Differences in marital status, land ownership, education, age, and institutional connectivity generated unequal capacities to negotiate access and transform labour into institutional influence and economic benefit. Married women, widowed women, women without land certificates, and younger digitally connected women experienced distinct pathways of participation and exclusion. At the same time, women exercised agency through household bargaining, informal learning, solidarity networks, and subtle forms of everyday resistance that enabled continued engagement despite institutional constraints. These findings indicate that access is not passively received but actively negotiated within unequal governance environments.

This study contributes to debates on commons governance and gendered access by showing that inclusive governance requires more than expanding formal rights or increasing women's numerical representation within cooperative structures. Closing the gap between rights and reality requires transforming the institutional and social conditions through which participation, authority, and legitimacy are produced. This includes strengthening women's access to land recognition, finance, information, certification opportunities, and leadership pathways while simultaneously engaging male cooperative members, community leaders, and local institutions as active actors in promoting gender equality and more inclusive governance practices. Supporting women's networks and collective spaces remains important, but durable change depends on broader transformation of gender norms and institutional practices across the coffee commons.

Future research should further examine how gendered access evolves across different cooperative settings and changing governance arrangements through comparative and longitudinal approaches. Greater attention to intersectional differences and everyday forms of negotiation would deepen understanding of how access is continuously produced, contested, and transformed within agricultural commons. Such efforts are essential not only for advancing gender equity but also for strengthening the long-term sustainability, legitimacy, and resilience of community-based coffee governance systems.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Vellayati Hajad orcid.org/0000-0002-1297-1491
Universitas Teuku Umar, ID

Ikhsan Ikhsan orcid.org/0000-0001-6546-4082
Universitas Teuku Umar, ID

Nabila Hilmy Zafira orcid.org/0009-0008-5663-7402
Universitas Teuku Umar, ID

Sarini Vita Dewi orcid.org/0009-0005-5336-884X
Universitas Islam Negeri Arraniry, ID

Irma Permata Sari orcid.org/0000-0001-5851-7529
Universitas Negeri Jakarta, ID

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Hajad, V., Ikhsan, I., Zafira, N. H., Dewi, S. V., & Sari, I. P. (2026). Between Rights and Reality: Gendered Access and Cooperative Governance in the Gayo Coffee Commons, Indonesia. *International Journal of the Commons*, 20(1), pp. 611–629. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1673

Submitted: 23 October 2025 **Accepted:** 01 November 2026 **Published:** 26 November 2026

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