



# The Challenging of Women-headed Family during the Pandemic of Covid-19 in West Nusa Tenggara, Survive or Give up?

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on the governmental policies, lack of health facilities and infrastructure, the threat of economic crisis, increasing poverty rate, high inflation, and several issues in Indonesia, we investigate the role of women-headed families during the pandemic of Covid-19. Since Covid-19 entered Indonesia in March 2020, the number of women-headed families has increased significantly. The pandemic certainly impacts the resilience of women-headed families, including in Dasan Agung Village, Sapalarang District, Mataram City, in West Nusa Tenggara. We are focusing on three main types of women-headed families: women who become widows because their husbands die; their husband lost their job due to the impact of the long pandemic; third, they become the women-headed family because their husbands are sick and cannot work. Based on this circumstance, we investigate how women-headed families' resilience, both with intervention and without intervention. We use a qualitative descriptions approach with field research methods to understand how they could survive in the current situation, which forced social change worldwide, including in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *women-headed families, pandemic, resilience, spiritual strategy*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesian culture, the head of families are men, but in reality, many women have the role of it since they do not have any choice and become the family backbones. The term women-headed family also applies to those who are single. The burden of living for a women-headed family is heavier than for men due to the demands of the norms and values of Indonesian society, which requires women also to be able to educate their children, carry out household chores, protect the family, etc. At the same time, they still have responsibility for supporting and protecting their family member and might forget to carry out themselves. This situation weighed on them and got worst when the Covid-19 pandemic hit Indonesia in March 2020.

According to the National Socio-Economic Survey of the Central Statistical Agency (Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS)) (in 2020, there were 11.44 million female heads of households, which means about 15.7% of the total households in Indonesia). This data shows an increase in women's headed families by 31 percent from 2016 to 2020. The number of women-headed families continues to rise during the pandemic. A women-headed family is a vulnerable group both socially and economically.

Fitria Villa Sahara, co-director of the Foundation for the Empowerment of Families Heads of Women (Perempuan Kepala Keluarga (PEKKA)), in an interview with Tempo in October 2021, said, "*during the pandemic, women-headed families are increasingly far from being prosperous*" [1].

Based on data stated that 95 percent of women's-headed families work in the informal sector, such as small stores owner, laborers, farmers or farm workers, and other professions of those for less than 500,000 Rupiah per month. Meanwhile, 32.6 percent of their income is only up to a million per month, and 18.3 percent is more than a million. This condition is relatively common in almost all of Indonesia's lower-class economic groups, and the data may be much higher.

This study aims to analyze the resilience of women-headed families during the pandemic, focusing on several issues: their strategy to survive in this situation and what impacts the pandemic on their social life. We do this research in Dasan Agung Village, Selaparang District, Mataram City, West Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB)). The Dasan Agung village was chosen as the research field because a data survey from

BPS in 2019, the percentage of women-headed families in NTB was the highest rate in Indonesia at 21.99%. [2].

This condition also shows that all families face the same uncertainty; when Covid-19 will end, at least the number of people with Covid-19 is sloping. In addition, the pandemic has had a more pronounced impact on the economy, where the prices of goods have skyrocketed, while on the one hand, their income has fallen significantly.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Oktaviani Nindya Putri et al. [3] stated there are several factors why people become women-headed families: first, divorced; second, women who are pregnant and have children then abandoned by their partners; third, women who become widows because their husbands die. This background makes women act as economic supporters while meeting the needs of family affection. It is also uneasy about balancing the role between domestic and public functions. A sustainable women's empowerment program is needed to help family women become economically independent without giving up their role as mothers. However, this consideration only revolves around the level of norms surrounding female heads of household, without any empowerment program.

In other research, Ernawati [4] criticizes the government's policies toward women-headed families. She said the government had not given maximum attention and protection to them. Although the number of women-headed families continues to increase yearly, the development still discriminates against them, and no law guarantees their rights. Ernawati emphasized that this was the impact of social construction that placed women-headed families as inferior. They look like always under the shadow of patriarchy, whose presence was considered non-existent.

Both the research of Oktaviani et al. and Ernawati have yet to be able to answer in detail precisely what obstacles women's families face in the field because they only focus on presenting ideas. Those study also needs concrete data; for example, there are no accurate areas where women-headed families still need attention from the government or related organization to assist them. Meanwhile, not all women-headed family heads have the same conditions, educational background, neighbourhood, and the kind of work they do to survive. The two studies also do not present and analyze women's resilience strategy so that themselves and their families member can survive.

Lale Niti Yustitin conducted a more specific study on women-headed families in NTB in 2016. Her research focused on the Empowerment of Female

Heads of Households (Perempuan Kepala Keluarga (PEKKA)) program in Sukarara Village, Kacan Jonggat, Central Lombok Regency. Empowerment of Women-Headed Families or PEKKA is an organization that assists women that Komnas Perempuan initiated in 2000. Komnas is an acronym for Komisi Nasional, an independent organization similar to the other state organization.

Yustitin, stated that PEKKA has an essential role for women-headed families in the village; they do artisan training and business development and help to obtain independent business capital loans to increase the productivity of artisan products [5]. This organization also provides capital assistance, so they can still do the side jobs [5]. She shows that through PEKKA's contribution, the participants can increase their income by 18 percent per year. However, she found that the programs of PEKKA had failed to reach a broader range of women-headed families in NTB.

She highlighted two main factors related to this: first, because the socialization of the program is not yet maximum, and second is that the participants are still less active in participating in the program because, after all, the program aims to make the participants more independent. However, her research could be more precise to measure the current situation since it is conducted before the pandemic of Covid-19. However, her results contribute to measuring the resilience of women-headed families to survive; before and after the pandemic. Therefore, we can find if there is any change in their socio-economic life; or it turns out that women-headed families did not experience significant changes during the pandemic.

## 3. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with field research methods to help researchers analyze the strategies of women-headed families in Dasan Agung Village, Salaparang District, Mataram City, surviving during the pandemic of Covid-19.

The women-headed families in this study mostly work in the informal sector with irregular income. The category of women-headed families who became informants were widows left behind by their husbands, divorced, and their husbands who were ill; she had to replace her husband to earn a living.

Data collection through observation techniques, interviews with 15 respondents who represent the area where they live, and documentation. Data analysis techniques through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data display, pooled data, concluding, data validity techniques, triangulation of sources, time, and processes.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1. *The Dynamic of Women-Headed Family in Indonesia*

The women-headed family refers to the definition of BPS, a person responsible for fulfilling the daily needs of all family members. Based on the number of women-headed families mentioned before, about 15.7 percent of families in Indonesia depend on women for their livelihood. Statistical data on the increasing number of women-headed families in Indonesia can be seen in the following table:

**Table 1.** Women Headed Family in Indonesia (2016-2020)

Status	The population of Women Headed Family		Growth (2016-2020)
	2016	2020	
Single	714.675	869.277	22%
Married	1.004.343	1.101.372	10%
Divorced	1.450.609	1.572.259	8%
Death divorce	7.000.642	7.89.207	13%

(Source: Susenas 2016 & 2020, <https://lokadata.id/artikel/1-dari-6-keluarga-indonesia-gantungkan-nafkah-pada-perempuan.>)

The data shows a relatively high increase in the number of single or unmarried women-headed families by 22 percent. Various jobs, not just focused on heavy industry, mining, plantations, etc., open up opportunities for women to have a career and find work much more accessible. Besides the development of the service sector, such as banking, retail, entertainment, culinary, salon, and others, it is not surprising that many women today choose to become professionals. However, these services sectors dominated by women jobs were hit hardest by some policies during the pandemic because those sectors lost many customers. While the government's policy of implementing Enforcement of Restrictions on Community Activities (Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat (PPKM)) is detrimental to this industry, including those who work in it.

Indeed, the pandemic situation is challenging for women-headed families. The National Socio-Economic Survey (Survei Sosial Ekonomi Nasional (Susenas)) shows that the majority of women-headed families (up to 82 percent). They belong to the lower socio-economic classes [6]; 38 percent have an income of > 2 million Rupiah per month, and others and about 44

percent have an income intergroup of about 2 to 5 million Rupiah per month.

In such a position, women-headed families should become a priority and target of assistance policy during the pandemic. Unfortunately, many of them need to be registered. Although the government had disbursed Village Fund Direct Cash Assistance (Bantuan Langsung Tunai (BLT)) to women-headed families up to 7,554,031 Rupiah, the number is up to 31 per cent, or the equivalent of 2,341,750 of whom were female heads of households, as reported by Abdul Halim Iskandar, Minister of Disadvantaged Villages and Transmigration, in his press conference [7]. Most BLT PEKKA recipients live on the island of Java at 52 percent.

The problem with the data of aid recipients is quite complicated because of the vast area of coverage in Indonesia. Data discrepancies often occur and make not all assistance programs on target. For example, the survey of the Community-Based Welfare Monitoring System (Sistem (Pemantauan Kesejahteraan Berbasis Komunitas) conducted by PEKKA found that around 25 percent of 111 villages in 17 provinces have households headed by women. While the official government survey, the figure is much lower. This data will always continue to change and require more accurate data collection. Furthermore, PEKKA is not only a question of assistance but, more importantly, how women-headed families can become more independent through more sustainable government programs.

### 4.2. *Resilience of Women-Headed Families in Dasan Agung Village, Salaparang District, West Nusa Tenggara*

Geographically, Dasan Agung Village is located in the middle of a densely populated settlement in an urban area with 97 hectares. In its profile report and monograph, the density level reached 8,571 people, with a distribution of 4,198 males and 4,319 females, and the number of households reached 2,605 families [9]. Still, there are no details about the number of women-headed families, but refers to field observations and interviews with respondents show that female heads of households are relatively significant in that area.

Becoming a women-headed family is hard in social life, but it is not an option because it is a duty if they are a mother. We find their status is why they persist in the negative stigma of being widows.

Based on the data analysis, the respondents are diverse in age but have the same work from informal sectors; some even do multiple jobs in one day. Most

respondents have responsibilities to carry out their children; while some have entered a non-productive age, they still have to work to support themselves and their family members. All respondents also consider not remarrying after separating from their partner due to death or divorce. They say it is God's destiny to be lived. The results of in-depth interviews show that several sources admitted that being the headed family is not a burden but a fortune, even if it is full of joys and sorrows.

The following is an excerpt from the results of the in-depth interviews with several women-headed families who may represent the respondents (to protect the personal data of the respondents, we will use anonymous respondents 1, 2, and 3). Respondent 1 said that she had been in a women-headed family for over a decade; even though she was not young, she had to continue supporting the family because her husband was sick and old. She not only keeps her husband, but she also has to bear a living for her children, who are married but unemployed due to layoffs when the pandemic occurred. Respondent 1 admitted that she had never received any assistance from the government, like financial assistance or program such as skill training. She sells snacks to meet her needs and all the family members. Respondent 1 needs to gain other skills and high education background to get a better job. Surviving during Covid-19, there is not much she can do other than surrender and strengthen her mentality and spirituality to face the situation.

Whereas, Respondent 2 admitted that she became a woman-headed family for one year and a half. Her husband was involved in a case and is still in prison. She has to support her son, who is still in the fourth grade of primary school, and one with a disability. Respondent 2 works as a laundry worker in a household-scale laundry. She wishes to have her own laundry business, so he does not have to work outside and supervise her children. Regarding Respondent 1, Respondent 2 also said that she had no special skills and never attended training for women-headed families in her neighborhood. Since she is still relatively young, Respondent 2 often receives a negative stigma from the environment when she leaves the house, even if she goes to work.

Respondent 3 has been in a women-headed family for nine years and is still responsible for supervising a daughter with disabilities. She ran a small business several times but went bankrupt because she ran out of capital, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. The merchandise did not sell much; people were afraid of infecting Covid-19. Respondent 3 works as a laundry worker to meet her needs during the pandemic. She was grateful to have received help from the government, but

he did not want to depend on them and had to be independent. For her, spirituality also strengthened her even though she had no assets. She also admitted that she had no skills and never received assistance or participated in training programs from the government, related organizations or institutions, or university programs.

Respondents 1, 2, and 3 said that their income decreased drastically from the beginning of the pandemic of Covid-19 until mid-2021. Nevertheless, today, their income was close to average and better. The result of interviews with fifteen women-headed families shows some commonalities in their strategy to survive during the pandemic. The financial sector has the most influence in this situation, although some already have assets, such as having a small business as a source of livelihood.

The data shows that the women-headed families in Dasan Agung village have a strategy to survive during the Covid-19 pandemic by seeking other jobs in the informal sector while continuing to work. For example, in the morning, they work helping to steam tuna to sell it in the market; on the same day, they are sand carriers, brick lifters, rice paddy workers, etc.

We analyze their primary strategy as always struggling, not giving up on the stigma, and believing in God that they will be better one day. This determination is often seen as a way to escape from real life; on the contrary, in the context of a religious society, it is a natural survival strategy and closely related to human nature. One of the reasons behind this construction is that they do not have a specific plan to survive; most of the respondents have never received assistance from the government during the pandemic, like financial aid, training, skills, and business capital. There are several possible factors why this happens: first, because they are not included in the database, so they are not included in the list of aid recipients; second, there may be there are people who need the most in the neighbourhood than them; third, due to the lack of socialization by the government and related institutions; fourth, because they do not seek information on training and other programs for support the women-headed families in their village.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The independence of women-headed families is not only a concern of the government but also of related institutions, including the smallest circle of society, that is, the environment in which they live. Unfortunately, being a widow or woman-headed family in Indonesian culture often carries a negative stigma from society. This stigma certainly adds to the social burden for them. Still, they can show that they can independently and

positively appear as culturally solid figures, especially to their families.

From the field research results, the pandemic of Covid-19 has dramatically impacted the informal sector, which is the basis of their livelihood, and it automatically affects their income, which has decreased drastically, especially at the beginning and peak season of Covid-19 last year.

In addition, we underline several things; indeed, not all women-headed families have the same resilience in the face of the pandemic situation based on their work, income, level of need, and the number of family members. However, when it comes to non-physical resilience, most of our respondents explain that spirituality, surrender to God's destiny, and obedience are the highest strategies of resilience. Those things make them survive in any conditions. Meanwhile, when it comes to interventions related to financial strength, they have high hopes of receiving training, therefore that they can improve their skills and be more productive in the future.

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