

Article type:
Qualitative Research

- 1 Professor, Indonesian Language Education, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia.
- 2 Professor, Pancasila and Civic Education, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia.
- 3 Professor, Indonesian Language and Literature Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia.
- 4 Professor, Indonesian Language and Literature Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia.
- 5 PhD, Malaysian Languages and Applied Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Corresponding author email address:
anasahmadi@unesa.ac.id

Women's Identity in Local Communities: An Ethno-Gender Study of Cultural, Literary, and Religious Women's Communities in Indonesia

Anas. Ahmadi^{1*}, Muhammad Turhan. Yani², Yulianeta³,
Nugraheni Eko. Wardani⁴, Norfaizal. Jamain⁵

ABSTRACT

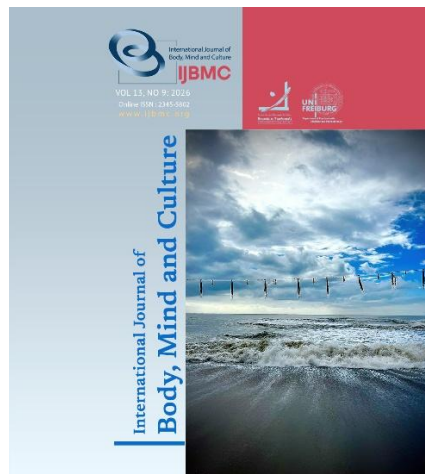
Objective: To examine how women's identities, agency, and collective participation are expressed through cultural, literary, and religious women's communities in Java, Indonesia, using an ethno-gender perspective.

Methods and Materials: A multi-site qualitative ethnographic design involved 137 Javanese women from East Java (n = 39), Central Java (n = 60), and West Java (n = 38). Data sources included participant questionnaires for demographic and community mapping, semi-structured interviews, observation, documentary materials, field notes, and a focus-group discussion with 10 gender practitioners. Analysis proceeded through data identification and reduction, open and axial coding, cross-regional comparison, triangulation, peer discussion, and interpretive verification.

Findings: The mapping documented 253 community-category entries: 85 cultural, 81 literary, and 87 religious. Religious communities were numerically the largest category, although the differences across domains were modest. Participation rates varied across provinces, and participants consistently described women's communities as spaces for social support, exchange of ideas, identity expression, capacity development, leadership, advocacy, and reinterpretation of cultural and religious norms.

Conclusion: Women's communities in Java appear to function as culturally embedded social spaces in which identity, belonging, agency, and public participation are negotiated. The findings support an intersectional interpretation of ethno-gender while remaining limited by voluntary recruitment, the Java-only setting, and the descriptive nature of the community inventory.

Keywords: Women's Communities, Ethno-Gender, Identity, Gender Equality, Culture, Literature, Religion.



Article history:

Received 23 Mar 2026
Revised 18 May 2026
Accepted 24 June 2026
Published online 01 Sep 2026

How to cite this article:

Ahmadi, A., Yani, M. T., Yulianeta, Y., Wardani, N. E., & Jamain, N. (2026). Women's Identity in Local Communities: An Ethno-Gender Study of Cultural, Literary, and Religious Women's Communities in Indonesia. *International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture*, 13(9), Article e2026-1375.
<https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v13i9.1375>



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Introduction

Women's identities are formed through interactions among gender, ethnicity, social position, education, religion, family expectations, and access to collective spaces. Intersectional and anthropological perspectives emphasize that these dimensions are not independent categories; they shape one another and influence how women understand themselves and participate in social life (Crenshaw, 1989; Moore, 1994; Tuki, 2025). Recent qualitative research also shows that women's identities and well-being are negotiated through institutional demands, social support, and gendered expectations rather than through a single role or setting (Sylvia et al., 2026).

Community participation is especially important because organized groups can convert shared experience into social resources, voice, and agency. Women's empowerment has been conceptualized as an expansion of resources, agency, and meaningful achievements, while community-based feminist practice highlights collective learning and the capacity to reinterpret constraints that appear private or individual (Batliwala, 1994; Kabeer, 1999; O'Grady, 2016). Identity development may therefore involve not only personal reflection but also participation in social spaces that permit recognition, negotiation of gender roles, and redefinition of future possibilities (Masteri Farahani & Khosravi, 2025).

Java offers an important setting for examining these processes. Historical scholarship on Javanese social life has documented complex relationships among domestic roles, market participation, religion, education, and changing forms of modernity (Brenner, 1998; Williams, 1991). At the same time, gender inequality remains uneven across local contexts, including settings where patriarchal norms are reinforced through socioeconomic and religious structures (Sudarso et al., 2019). These tensions make women's communities useful sites for examining how cultural continuity and social change are negotiated in everyday life.

Previous research has examined women's empowerment, religion, cultural identity, literary voice, and gender relations separately, but fewer studies have compared multiple forms of women's communities within one regional framework. The present study addresses this gap by examining cultural, literary, and religious women's communities across East, Central, and West Java. It asks three

questions: (1) What types of women's communities are identifiable across the three provinces? (2) How do women describe the functions and contributions of these communities? and (3) How can these patterns be interpreted through an ethno-gender lens that attends to culture, religion, identity, and collective agency?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, ethno-gender is used as an analytical lens rather than as a fixed cultural category. It refers to the intersection of gender with ethnicity, cultural location, religion, social institutions, and historically situated power relations. This framing is consistent with scholarship showing that gendered outcomes differ across ethnic and cultural contexts and are shaped by institutional opportunities, labor-market structures, acculturation, and political organization (Cherng et al., 2019; Li, 2024; Naidoo & Mahabeer, 2006; Ruwanpura, 2007; Tkhapsoev, 2022; Urankhaeva et al., 2018). The lens is also informed by intersectionality, which cautions against interpreting gender through a single-axis framework detached from other social positions (Crenshaw, 1989).

The framework further treats women's communities as meso-level social spaces between the individual and broader institutions. Such communities may provide resources, social recognition, shared narratives, opportunities for leadership, and collective strategies for responding to unequal norms (Batliwala, 1994; Collins, 2022; Kabeer, 1999). Their significance may vary by domain. Cultural communities may strengthen identity expression and reinterpretation of tradition; literary communities may enable narrative voice and counter-narratives; and religious communities may provide belonging, moral language, support, and opportunities for civic participation while also operating within gendered religious structures (Balchin, 2003; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1999; Merry, 2001; Turner, 1997).

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

A multi-site qualitative ethnographic design was used to examine women's community participation across East Java, Central Java, and West Java. The study included 137 Javanese women: 39 from East Java, 60 from Central Java, and 38 from West Java. Participation was voluntary. The study combined

qualitative inquiry with descriptive mapping of participant characteristics and community types; the numerical summaries are therefore descriptive and are not intended as population estimates.

Participant age distributions are summarized in Table 1, educational profiles in Table 2, occupational

Table 1

Age distribution of participants by province (N = 137)

Age group	East Java, n (%)	Central Java, n (%)	West Java, n (%)
< 20 years	20 (51.28)	3 (5.00)	14 (36.84)
21–30 years	6 (15.38)	34 (56.67)	14 (36.84)
31–40 years	8 (20.51)	7 (11.67)	3 (7.89)
41–50 years	5 (12.82)	7 (11.67)	2 (5.26)
> 50 years	0 (0.00)	9 (15.00)	5 (13.16)

Table 2

Educational level of participants by province

Education	East Java, n (%)	Central Java, n (%)	West Java, n (%)
High school	3 (7.69)	4 (6.67)	16 (42.11)
Bachelor's degree	36 (92.31)	43 (71.67)	16 (42.11)
Master's degree	0 (0.00)	13 (21.67)	5 (13.16)
Doctoral degree	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	1 (2.63)

Table 3

Occupational profile of participants by province

Occupation	East Java, n (%)	Central Java, n (%)	West Java, n (%)
Lecturer	0 (0.00)	4 (6.67)	4 (10.53)
Teacher	9 (23.08)	10 (16.67)	5 (13.16)
Housewife	2 (5.13)	8 (13.33)	1 (2.63)
Student	24 (61.54)	30 (50.00)	6 (15.79)
Pupil	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	16 (42.11)
Civil servant/state-owned enterprise	2 (5.13)	0 (0.00)	1 (2.63)
Self-employed/entrepreneur	2 (5.13)	8 (13.33)	2 (5.26)
Editor	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	1 (2.63)
Employee	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	2 (5.26)

Table 4

Cities or districts of birth represented in the sample

East Java	Central Java	West Java
Blitar, Bojonegoro, Gresik, Jombang, Kediri, Madiun, Magetan, Malang, Mojokerto, Nganjuk, Ngawi, Ponorogo, Sampang, Sidoarjo, Surabaya	Banyumas, Blora, Boyolali, Brebes, Karanganyar, Klaten, Magelang, Pemalang, Purworejo, Semarang, Sragen, Sukoharjo, Surakarta (Solo), Temanggung, Wonogiri	Bandung, Cianjur, Cimahi, Cirebon, Garut, Purwakarta, Sukabumi, Sumedang, Tasikmalaya

Data Collection

Data were collected through participant questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observation, documentary review, field notes, and visual or audiovisual recording where appropriate. Semi-structured interviewing was emphasized because it permits a common topical structure while allowing participants to elaborate their own meanings and experiences (Hammersley, 2012; Kelly et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). Interviews focused on community participation, perceived changes after

profiles in Table 3, and cities of birth in Table 4. These tables are used to describe the range of participants across the three provinces rather than to support statistical inference.

participation, community functions, and the contribution of cultural, literary, and religious groups to women's identity and gender equality.

The research team also conducted an initial field survey and documented women's communities across the three provinces. Community information was organized by domain—cultural, literary, or religious—and compared across locations. Because some organizations can plausibly operate across more than one domain, the totals are interpreted as

community-category entries rather than as a verified census of unique organizations.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Analysis proceeded through data identification, reduction, coding, presentation, and verification, consistent with an iterative qualitative analytic process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Open coding was followed by axial coding to connect recurring

meanings across participants and provinces. The team used data and theory triangulation, peer discussion, and intersubjective checking to challenge interpretations. A focus-group discussion with 10 practitioners with gender expertise was used as an additional interpretive validation step. The overall analytic workflow is shown in Figure 1 (Creswell et al., 2007).

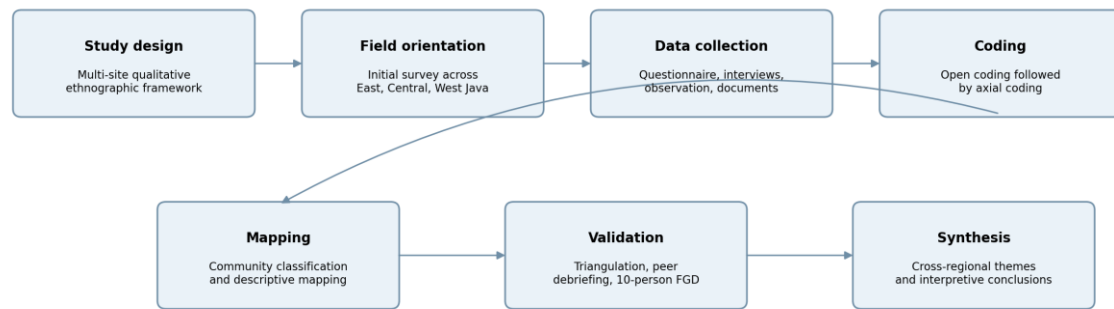


Figure 1

Analytic workflow used in the multi-site qualitative study

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Universitas Negeri Surabaya (No. 001/UN38.16/KEP/EC/2026). Participants provided information voluntarily, and female informants were reported anonymously in the manuscript. The research team used repeated checks and cross-checks of interview data to reduce interpretive error and protect the integrity of participant accounts.

Findings and Results

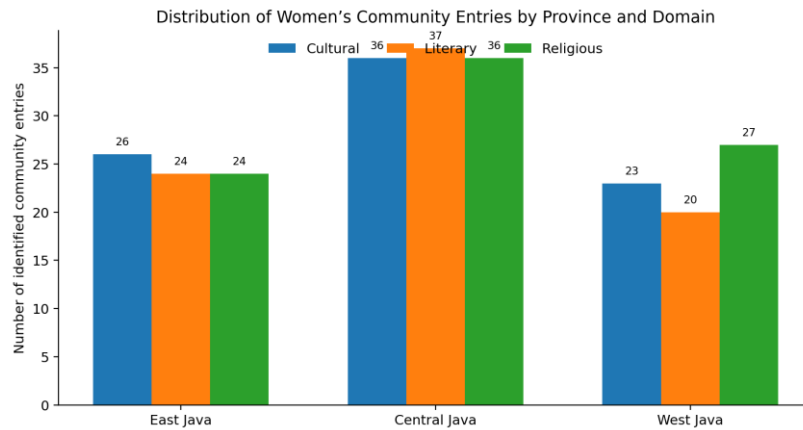
Community Distribution and Participation

Across the three provinces, the study documented 253 community-category entries: 85 cultural, 81 literary, and 87 religious. East Java included 26 cultural, 24 literary, and 24 religious entries; Central Java included 36 cultural, 37 literary, and 36 religious entries; and West Java included 23 cultural, 20 literary, and 27 religious entries. The full cross-provincial distribution is presented in Table 5 and visualized in Figure 2.

Table 5

Distribution of identified women's community entries by province and domain

Province	Cultural	Literary	Religious	Total entries
East Java	26	24	24	74
Central Java	36	37	36	109
West Java	23	20	27	70
Total	85	81	87	253

**Figure 2**

Distribution of women's community entries by province and domain

Participation in at least one women's community was reported by 61.54% of respondents in East Java, 56.67% in Central Java, and 44.74% in West Java. Among participants who described their experience after joining a community, the source data reported perceived personal change in 94.74% of East Java respondents, 90.48% of Central Java respondents, and 76.32% of West Java respondents. The corresponding West Java proportion reporting no change was 23.68%. These percentages are descriptive and should not be interpreted as causal effects of community membership.

Cross-Regional Qualitative Themes

Although the three community domains differed in content, participant accounts converged around several recurring functions. Cultural groups were described as places for sustaining and reinterpreting local practices; literary groups provided channels for writing,

storytelling, reading, and public expression; and religious groups combined spiritual activity with social support, learning, and collective participation. Across domains, participants repeatedly emphasized safety, exchange of experience, knowledge development, confidence, voice, leadership, and solidarity.

The East Java accounts emphasized safe spaces for sharing experiences, critical awareness, stronger women's voices, collective advocacy, and reinterpretation of cultural and religious norms. Central Java accounts emphasized capacity development, opportunities for women to lead, awareness of rights, and support for policy or social change. West Java accounts highlighted learning spaces, increased confidence, greater knowledge in patriarchal environments, advocacy, and expanded access to public participation. These cross-regional functions are synthesized in [Table 6](#).

Table 6

Cross-regional synthesis of reported functions of women's communities

Theme	Community function	Evidence across provinces
Safe space and social support	Sharing experiences, reducing isolation, mutual support	Reported across East, Central, and West Java
Knowledge and critical awareness	Learning about rights, gender roles, culture, religion, and social issues	Strongly emphasized across all three provinces
Voice and advocacy	Speaking publicly, expressing concerns, constructing counter-narratives, advocating change	Prominent in East and Central Java and present in West Java
Capacity and leadership	Developing skills, confidence, organizational roles, and leadership opportunities	Especially visible in Central Java; also present in East and West Java
Cultural and religious reinterpretation	Reconsidering norms that constrain women while retaining culturally meaningful forms of belonging	Reported in cultural and religious communities across provinces
Identity expression and self-development	Expressing talents, literary voice, cultural identity, and personal growth	Reported across cultural, literary, and religious domains

Discussion and Conclusion

The most important quantitative pattern is not a large separation among community domains but their relative balance. Religious communities were numerically the largest category (87 entries), followed closely by cultural (85) and literary communities (81). This distribution suggests that religion is an important organizational setting for Javanese women, but it should not be treated as the only or overwhelmingly dominant arena. The pattern is consistent with the institutional visibility of religion in Indonesian social life and with research showing that religious spaces can function simultaneously as sites of belonging, support, civic participation, and negotiation of gender norms (Balchin, 2003; Reid, 2012; Sudarso et al., 2019; Turner, 1997).

The qualitative findings also support an empowerment interpretation. Participants described women's communities as sources of knowledge, social support, voice, leadership, and collective problem-solving. These functions correspond closely to conceptions of empowerment that emphasize access to resources, the capacity to make meaningful choices, and the ability to translate agency into valued outcomes (Batliwala, 1994; Kabeer, 1999). They also align with feminist scholarship in which collective spaces enable marginalized knowledge and experience to become visible and politically meaningful (Collins, 2022; O'Grady, 2016).

Cultural and literary communities appear particularly important for identity expression. Cultural groups provide settings in which women can participate in heritage practices without treating tradition as fixed, whereas literary groups offer narrative spaces for articulating experiences and challenging dominant accounts. Research on women's writing similarly shows how narrative and testimony can transform private experience into collective knowledge and counter-narrative (Jawade & Navlekar, 2025; Rai, 2007; Rege, 2014). More broadly, cultural identity is produced through interpretation, social relationships, and symbolic practices rather than simply inherited unchanged (Cerna & Wallace, 2000; Moore, 1994).

The findings are also consistent with the idea that identity is renegotiated when women gain access to new social roles and forms of recognition. Qualitative work on young women has shown that changing career identities can reshape gender-role expectations and relational schemas, while Indonesian research with female doctoral students highlights the importance of social support and institutional context in negotiating multiple identities (Masteri Farahani & Khosravi, 2025; Sylvia et al., 2026). In the present study, women's communities appear to provide a comparable social arena for developing voice and public participation, although the design does not establish that community participation caused these changes.

Regional differences in participation also caution against treating "Javanese women" as a homogeneous category. Participation was higher in East and Central Java than in West Java in this sample, and the composition of occupations, age groups, and education differed across provinces. An ethno-gender interpretation therefore requires attention to local institutions, class, age, education, religion, and community opportunity rather than assuming a single cultural effect (Crenshaw, 1989; Ruwanpura, 2007).

Implications

Women's communities can be understood as social infrastructure for gender participation: they create recurring settings in which women meet, exchange knowledge, build trust, practice leadership, and negotiate the meaning of cultural or religious norms. For practitioners and community organizations, the findings support strengthening inclusive spaces that allow women to participate without requiring them to abandon culturally meaningful identities. For researchers, the results suggest that community domain, organizational role, life stage, and local context should be measured separately rather than collapsed into a single indicator of "women's participation."

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should guide interpretation. First, the study used voluntary participants from Java and did not employ probability sampling, so

the demographic profile cannot be generalized to all Javanese women. Second, the inventory of community entries was assembled from participant reports, field observation, and documentary sources and should not be treated as an exhaustive census of unique organizations; some groups may operate across more than one domain. Third, the study did not provide sufficiently detailed within-group analysis by age, education, occupation, religion, or organizational role, limiting intersectional comparison. Fourth, self-reported change after joining a community is vulnerable to recall, selection, and social-desirability bias and cannot establish causation. Fifth, the study did not compare members with non-members using a design capable of estimating effects on well-being, agency, or gender attitudes. Future studies should use purposive maximum-variation sampling, deeper life-history interviews, explicit comparison across social positions, longitudinal designs, and mixed methods capable of linking qualitative mechanisms with validated measures of empowerment, belonging, and identity.

This study examined women's identity through cultural, literary, and religious communities across East, Central, and West Java. The mapping identified 253 community-category entries, with religious communities slightly more numerous than cultural and literary communities. More important than the numerical distribution, however, was the consistency of participant accounts: women described these communities as spaces for support, learning, identity expression, leadership, advocacy, and negotiation of social norms. An ethno-gender interpretation highlights that these functions are shaped by the intersection of gender with culture, religion, education, social position, and local institutional opportunity. Women's communities therefore appear to be important settings for collective agency and identity formation in Java, while broader and more rigorous studies are needed before drawing population-level or causal conclusions.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude to the LPDP-RKI PTNBH Indonesia program, the anonymous female informants who contributed their experiences, and the collaborative research teams of Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, and Universitas Sebelas Maret.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with principles of transparency and open research, the data and study materials are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality requirements.

Funding

This study was funded by the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education Agency (LPDP) under the RKI PTNBH collaboration involving Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, and Universitas Sebelas Maret for 2025–2026 (Contract No. B/161627/UN38.III.1/LK.04.00/2025).

Authors' Contributions

Anas Ahmadi contributed to the introduction, literature review, and methods. Yulianeta contributed to the analysis and conclusions. Nugraheni Eko Wardani contributed to proofreading of the article.

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