

From Ecological Defiance to Environmental Political Advocacy: Explaining the Transformation of the Mollo Women's Movement in South Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

This research examines how the Mollo women's movement shifted from ecofeminist resistance against marble mining to active involvement in environmental politics in South Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara. Previous studies have largely highlighted Aleta Baun as an activist and symbol of the indigenous movement, but have not delved into how the grassroots movement engaged in political representation and influenced public policy. In this study, the feminist political ecology perspective is used to explain that transformation. A qualitative approach is employed, using a case study to guide document analysis, literature review, and in-depth interviews with Aleta Baun, supported by a number of secondary sources. The results indicate that the Mollo women's movement was successful not only through resistance to mining, but also by combining local philosophy, indigenous identity, collective action among women, and community support to build political legitimacy. This transformation continued when Aleta Baun entered electoral politics, creating greater opportunities for environmental advocacy at the regional level. The study strengthens the areas of environmental politics and women's political representation by showing that indigenous ecofeminist movements can grow from community-based activism into more formal political advocacy, even when facing challenges in the policy process

Keywords: Feminist Political Ecology; Women's Movement; Indigenous Peoples; Environmental Politics; Political Representation

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Introduction

Rising conflicts between local communities and extractive industries have led to a growing focus on indigenous women's movements in environmental politics, emphasizing environmental protection. Collective action by women, rooted in cultural identity, local knowledge, and political strategies, is crucial for protecting natural resources in many countries. In Indonesia, the growth of the mining industry, which threatens indigenous communities, has encouraged the emergence of women's movements as resistance to mining. These include the Kendeng women in Central Java, the Amungme women in Papua, the Buyat women in North Sulawesi, and the Mollo women in South Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara (Hendrastiti, 2019).

The struggle of the Mollo women, especially, became one of the most prominent movements. Led by Aleta Baun, it aimed to oppose marble mining in Nausus and Anjaf areas, South Central Timor Regency. The Mollo people consider the land, forests, stones, and water as integral to their indigenous identity and way of living, rather than mere natural resources. Such a strong connection between humans and nature is the embodiment of their local philosophy: *naijan nam nes on sisi, oel nam nes on na, nasi nam nes on nak nafu, fatu nam nes on nuif* (land is flesh, water is blood, forests are veins and hair, and stone is bone). Hence, when mining activities began to encroach on the region in the late 1990s, the Mollo community viewed it as a threat to the sustainability of their lives, culture, and identity.

Further, the resistance of the Mollo women is significant because it went beyond conventional protest actions, as it included

cultural practices, such as weaving at the mining sites, as a form of symbolic resistance. The movement managed to obtain support from indigenous communities, local figures, civil society organizations, and the media. It eventually led to the closure of mining activities in several locations. Instead of ending the movement, the struggle continued in the arena of electoral politics through Aleta Baun's tenure as a member of the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) from 2014 to 2019. In this role, she actively advocated for environmental protection policies.

Previous studies have explored the struggle of Aleta Baun and the Mollo women from various perspectives. Firdaus (2019) focuses on the issue of human rights protection within natural resource conflicts. Dalupe (2020) examines the struggle from an ecofeminist perspective. Meanwhile, Mangilio (2015) and Ariani (2015) investigate the relation between Mollo community cosmology, indigenous identity, and ecofeminism. Another study conducted by Aprilia (2019) highlights the leadership of Aleta Baun as a female activist. These existing studies focus mainly on social movements, the leadership of Aleta Baun, and ecofeminist aspects. However, the transformation process of women's movement from grassroots resistance to electoral politics and environmental policy advocacy has not yet been adequately studied.

Most studies by ecofeminist researchers tend to examine the connection between women and nature from an essentialist perspective, arguing that women are inherently more in tune with nature. By taking a different path, this study uses the feminist political

ecology perspective as the fundamental framework for analyzing the interplay among gender, environment, indigenous communities, and power as social and political constructs. This approach allows for a more detailed analysis of how gender identities, local cultural values, and political opportunities shape the strategies of the women's movement.

This study offers a novelty by examining the transformation experienced by the Mollo women, from a resistance movement against marble mining to a tool for environmental political advocacy through involvement in electoral politics. Particularly, it addresses how the Mollo women's movement employed cultural identity, collective strategies, and political opportunities to transform their environmental struggle into political representation and environmental policy advocacy in East Nusa Tenggara.

Contributing to the fields of environmental politics, social movements, women's political representation, and feminist political ecology, this article proposes a model for the transformation of indigenous women's movements from ecological defense to environmental political advocacy. To explain this transformation process comprehensively, the study uses the feminist political ecology perspective as a conceptual framework for analyzing the interconnections among gender, the environment, indigenous communities, and power.

Conceptual Framework: Feminist Political Ecology

Research on women's movements to defend the environment can't be separated from the development of feminist political ecology (FPE) studies, which explain the relationships among gender, the environment, indigenous peoples, and power. This perspective appears as a critique of both political ecology and ecofeminism – approaches that tend to offer only partial explanations of the relationship between women and the environment. While political ecology emphasizes power relations in natural resource management, and early ecofeminism was frequently criticized for positing an inherent “natural” affinity between women and the environment, feminist political ecology views this relationship as the product of ongoing interactions among changing social, cultural, economic, and political structures (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Consequently, women are understood as social and political actors who construct knowledge, experiences, and strategies of struggle through their interactions with the environment.

Rocheleau et al. (1996) propose that feminist political ecology rests on three primary dimensions. The first dimension is gendered environmental knowledge –ecological knowledge developed through the experiences of women and men in accessing, managing, and utilizing natural resources. Differences in the division of labour, domestic responsibilities and social roles often mean that women have specific knowledge about water supplies, agricultural land, food crops, medicinal plants and the sustainability of local ecosystems. Such knowledge is not a biological consequence, but the outcome of social experiences shaped by the cultural and economic structures of a society.

This perspective also emphasizes gendered environmental rights and responsibilities, that is, the different rights and responsibilities men and women have over natural resource management. In many Indigenous societies, women hold an important position in maintaining sustainable resources for family life. However, societal structures and power relations often influence access to decision-making processes. Environmental conflicts are thus not only related to the exploitation of natural resources, but also to the distribution of rights, responsibilities and access to those resources.

The third dimension is gendered environmental politics and community organizing, that is, women's involvement in initiating social movements to protect the environment. This view points out that women's experiences in managing natural resources can be transformed into collective mobilization for ecological justice through various actions, either at the community level or in the formal political arena. Hence, women emerge as political agents capable of influencing public policy and not only as victims of environmental degradation.

Further, feminist political ecology has intellectual roots in ecofeminism yet with a different focus. The exploitation of nature is related to the subordination of women, as Shiva (1988) and Warren (1997) suggest. This perspective has made a significant contribution by highlighting the link between ecological crises and gender injustice. Later studies, however, have criticized ecofeminism for its tendency to portray women as a group as inherently close to nature. Feminist political ecology, however, contends that this affinity is

the product of division of labour, historical experiences, access to resources and social power relations (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Therefore, an analysis of women's movements must go beyond explaining the relationship between women and nature, and must also take into account how social and political structures condition the opportunities and constraints women face in their eco-advocacy.

Based on this premise, this study uses feminist political ecology as an analytical framework to explain the transformation of the Mollo women's movement from resistance to mining operations to advocacy for environmental politics. This perspective allows for an analysis that explores not only the relationship between women and the environment, but also how gender-based ecological knowledge informs collective mobilization, how cultural identity is used as a symbolic political strategy, how gender relations are negotiated within indigenous communities, and how the experiences from the movement are translated into political representation and policy advocacy through legislative bodies. Thus, feminist political ecology provides the conceptual basis that connects the different analysis phases of this study.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the transformation of the Mollo women's movement from resistance to marble mining to environmental political advocacy in South Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara. Given the study's aim to comprehend meanings, experiences, collective strategies, and political processes produced by movement

actors in particular social and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2018), a qualitative method was selected. Then, the case study design allows an in-depth investigation of the dynamics of the Mollo women's movement, a case characterized by unique intersections of social movements, indigenous communities, ecofeminism, and electoral politics (Neuman, 2014).

The research data were collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with Aleta Baun, an environmental activist and a member of the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) for the 2014–2019 term. The interviews were conducted in Jakarta, in 2019, using a semi-structured interview guide that inquired about the movement's formation, women's mobilization strategies, relationships with indigenous communities, and experiences entering electoral politics, and environmental policy advocacy.

Aleta Baun, the key informant, was selected due to her background as the initiator and leader of the Mollo women's movement. In addition, she experienced first-hand the shift from community organizing to formal political representation. Although this study is based on a single key informant, the validity of the data is strengthened by source triangulation, i.e. cross-checking interview data with a variety of documents, academic publications, reports for civil society organizations, policy documents, archives of mass media, and literature on the Mollo women's movement and mining conflicts in South Central Timor. Meanwhile, secondary data were gathered through a literature review

of books, scholarly journal articles, government documents, reports from non-governmental organizations, media coverage, and other documents relevant to issues of ecofeminism, social movements, indigenous communities, environmental politics, and women's political representation.

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative-interpretative approach with stages of data reduction, categorization, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis focused on four main themes: (1) the relationship between Mollo cosmology and gender-based ecological knowledge; (2) the mobilization strategies used by the women's movement in response to mining activities; (3) the movement's transformation toward electoral politics; and (4) the forms of environmental political advocacy undertaken after entering the legislative body. All findings were analyzed through the lens of feminist political ecology to explain the interconnections among gender, indigenous communities, the environment, and power. A limitation of this study is its reliance on a single key informant. Therefore, the interpretation of the results is not intended to represent the experiences of all Mollo women but to achieve an in-depth understanding of the movement's transformation from the perspective of the key actor who led it.

Result and Discussion

Stages in the Transformation of the Mollo Women's Movement

Table 1 presents the timeline of key events marking the transformation of the Mollo

women's movement, from the mining conflict to their involvement in electoral politics. This timeline provides context for the following analysis to help readers understand how the movement developed.

Table 1. Stages of the Transformation of the Mollo Women's Movement: From Ecological Resistance to Political Advocacy (1996–2016).

Year	Key Event	Analytical Significance
1996-1997	Mining companies began operations in the Mollo region	Onset of ecological conflict and threats to the indigenous community
1999	Aleta Baun began organizing Indigenous communities	The emergence of community-based leadership
2001	Demonstration by approximately 300 women at the South Central Timor Regent's Office	First collective mobilization in the public sphere
2003–2005	Formation of Indigenous community networks and support organizations	Strengthening of the movement organizations
2006–2007	Weaving action by approximately 150 women at the mine site over nearly a year	Symbolic politics and non-violent strategy
2007	Mining activities halted	Success of the social movement
2013–2014	Aleta Baun ran for a seat in the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD)	Transformation toward electoral politics
2014	Elected as a member of the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial DPRD	Institutionalization of social movement
2016	Advocacy for Regional Regulation (Perda)	Expanding the struggle into the public policy arena

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As shown in Table 1, the Mollo women's movement evolved through several interrelated phases: the emergence of an environmental conflict due to mining activities, mobilization of the indigenous community, the use of cultural resistance strategies, and the movement's entry into the formal political arena. This development suggests that the Mollo women's movement was not a simple spontaneous reaction to ecological degradation, but an organized process that developed gradually through organizational strengthening, establishment of social legitimacy and expansion of advocacy strategies.

In general, the movement progressed from local resistance to policy advocacy. Its main goal was to halt the mining project that threatened the survival of the indigenous community. As the movement grew, its tactics broadened from protests to using cultural identity as a political tool, building networks with civil society organizations and participating in legislative bodies to advance environmental protection. The shift demonstrates the movement's ability to respond to new political conditions, while remaining committed to defending indigenous rights to land, water and forests.

From a feminist political ecology perspective, this evolution demonstrates that the relationship between women, the environment and power is not fixed but fluid, responsive to social and political dynamics. Women's ecological knowledge formed the foundation for collective action. Their experience in community organizing became social and political capital, helping the movement expand

its influence in the public policy arena. The trajectory of the Mollo women's movement illustrates how the ecological experience of an indigenous community can be a political force that shapes the local democratic process.

The following analysis is structured around five aspects of the stages of development: (1) gendered ecological knowledge within the cosmology of the Mollo community; (2) the mobilization of the women's movement against mining; (3) the politics of weaving as a strategy of ecofeminist resistance; (4) the movement's progression into electoral politics; and (5) environmental political advocacy and its limitations. This categorization seeks to show that the success of the Mollo women's movement was not a result of any particular event but rather the interaction of cultural, social, political and institutional factors that unfolded over time.

Gendered Environmental Knowledge in Mollo Cosmology

For the Mollo indigenous people, the human relationship with nature is grounded in a cosmology inseparable from human life. In the Mollo perspective, land, water, stone and forest are not simple natural resources to be exploited for economic profit, but essential elements of life with spiritual, social and cultural values. The philosophy *naijan nam nes on sisi, oel nam nes on na, nasi nam nes on nak nafu, fatu nam nes on nuif* expresses the harmonic association, i.e. land is flesh, water is blood, the forest is veins and hair, and stone is bone. Damage to the natural environment is, thus, perceived as damage to the bodies and lives of the

community itself. This view is the moral foundation and collective identity of the Mollo community in the effort to maintain their living space.

This ecological relationship wasn't accidental, but was passed down from generation to generation through customs, farming methods, traditional rituals and daily life. Mount Mutis, together with Nausus and Anjaf areas, is an important hub for water, agricultural land, fodder for livestock, food, medicinal plants and natural dyes for weaving. Therefore, the natural environment not only has ecological functions, but also maintains household economies, cultural identity, and the continuity of the indigenous community.

From the perspective of feminist political ecology, this can be understood as a form of gendered environmental knowledge –ecological knowledge influenced by social and cultural experiences and the gendered division of labour (Rocheleau et al., 1996). This understanding is not a result of women's biological nature, but of their experiences in managing everyday life. Traditionally, women in Mollo have been engaged in collecting water, processing agricultural produce, gathering medicinal plants, obtaining natural dyes for weaving, and ensuring food security for their families. These activities give women in-depth knowledge of soil conditions, water sources, plant species, seasonal cycles, and environmental changes that affect the community's way of life.

Interviews with Aleta Baun indicate that this ecological awareness was the main basis for the emergence of the resistance movement against marble mining. She pointed out that destroying

the karst rock formations would mean destroying the water sources that have long supported the lives of the Mollo people.

“I felt the need to defend the interests of the indigenous Mollo community because the land, the water and the stone are our identity; they are gifts from God that we should always protect. What will we get water from if we mine this stone? Where do we farm? How will our children eat? Where are we going to live?” (Interview with Aleta Baun, July 21, 2019).

This statement indicates that the cause being supported is not just environmental protection, but also the defense of cultural identity, the sustainability of livelihoods, and the rights of indigenous peoples. The danger to the Rocky Mountains is seen as a threat to the whole social system of the community because the loss of the rocks means the loss of water supplies, farmland, and the economic viability of families.

The findings also indicate that the relationship between Mollo women and nature cannot be explained by an essentialist ecofeminist approach that assumes women are inherently closer to nature. Instead, this proximity is socially constructed, arising from the division of labor, household chores, and local systems of knowledge developed within the indigenous community. Thus, women's ecological experiences stem from their social position within the community, not merely from their biological nature.

In this sense, women's ecological knowledge is social and political capital that helps legitimate the environmental movement. Knowing the need to protect water sources, soil fertility and forests gives Mollo women a strong moral basis for organizing the community against marble mining. To put it another way,

gendered environmental knowledge not only improves ecological awareness but also provides a political legitimacy that supports the collective efforts of the Mollo people to defend their land. The findings suggest that localized, gendered knowledge can be an important basis for shifting an indigenous movement from merely protecting the environment to becoming a political force capable of influencing policy.

The Mobilization of Mollo Women's Movement against Mining

In the late 1990s, marble-mining companies were established in the Nausus and Anjaf regions. This led to a resistance movement by the indigenous Mollo people. Marble extraction altered the environment and threatened the sustainability of water sources, agricultural land, forests, and traditional sites integral to the community's way of life. Environmental degradation endangered the Mollo people's identity and the sustainability of their indigenous society. Thus, resistance to mining was an effort to protect their living space and preserve their ancestral cultural heritage. This situation prompted Aleta Baun to begin organizing the community by visiting villages around Mount Mutis to raise awareness of the ecological impacts of mining. The movement began with a few women who voluntarily travelled from village to village to talk to indigenous people. This strategy was used because a great part of the Mollo region is mountainous and lacks proper transport access. As mentioned by Aleta Baun:

“I felt the need to defend the interests of the indigenous Mollo community because the land, the water and the stone are our identity; they are gifts from God that we should always

protect. What will we get water from if we mine this stone? Where do we farm? How will our children eat? Where are we going to live?" (Interview with Aleta Baun, July 21, 2019).

The statement implies more than a rejection of mining operations; it represents the ideal of protecting indigenous identity and ensuring the sustainability of life for future generations. It supplied the moral impetus for the merging of communities from different villages into a common cause.

As shared awareness grew, activism followed, with more organized action. In 2001, approximately 300 women from the Mollo tribe demonstrated in front of the South Central Timor Regent's office, protesting against marble mining (Selan et al., 2023). The protest was against the local government's policy of issuing mining licences without consulting the indigenous community. The movement, then, developed through the establishment of the Mollo Alliance of Communities Concerned with Marble Mining, Mollo, and the Attaemamus Indigenous Organization (OAT).

This mobilization did not happen without a number of hurdles. People with vested interests in the mining activities have intimidated, criminalized, physically assaulted and threatened the lives of Aleta Baun and Mollo women. At one point, Aleta Baun had to hide in the forest with her baby for several months to escape these threats (Aleta Baun - Mama Aleta Fund, 2024). That episode in the living story reflects that the fight for environmental protection is also a fight against existing power structures that make the indigenous community, especially women, vulnerable.

From a feminist political ecology viewpoint, the movement spearheaded by Aleta Baun demonstrates that its legitimacy was not established exclusively on personal leadership, but rather through the incorporation of traditional frameworks, group identity, and the society's ecological encounters (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Assistance from traditional clan houses Rumah Adat expanded the movement's foundation of legitimacy, guaranteeing that environmental issues were viewed not as the individual concerns of a sole activist, but as the concerns of the whole indigenous people. Therefore, customary structures functioned as a source of social legitimacy, while collective encounters with ecological damage encouraged the community unity that in turn fostered the community's capacity for mobilization.

These findings also suggest that the achievements of the Mollo women's movement cannot be explained solely by charismatic leadership. Although Aleta Baun was pivotal as the movement's initiator, the mobilization's success was primarily shaped by her ability to reshape local cultural values into a "collective action frame" (Tarrow, 2011) that resonated with the whole community. The belief that land, stone, water, and forest are extensions of the human body becomes a unifying narrative, synchronizing the interests of women, men, traditional leaders, and the general public toward a shared mission: maintaining the Mollo community's living space

The mobilization of the Mollo women's movement also proves that women are not merely protest participants; more importantly, they are political actors within their community.

They were actively involved in various activities: building social networks, organizing people, and connecting indigenous communities with civil society groups, the media, and local government. Hence, through the movement, indigenous women affirm their roles not only as individuals affected by environmental harm but also as active figures who create knowledge, organize communities, and drive political change.

These findings contribute to feminist political ecology by showing that gendered environmental knowledge can become a collective political mobilization when cultural identity, indigenous institutions, and leadership are present to nurture trust within the community (Selan et al., 2025). In the Mollo context, the success of the mobilization not only led to the discontinuation of mining activities but also paved the way for the movement's transformation toward environmental political advocacy through electoral politics – a topic discussed in the next section.

Weaving as an Ecofeminist Strategy of Resistance

The mobilization of the Mollo women's movement peaked in 2006, when approximately 150 women occupied a marble mining site in the Faut Lik area, engaging in continuous weaving activities for nearly a year (Parastasia, 2021). Unlike typical protests involving speeches, marches, or road blockades, the Mollo women chose weaving as their form of resistance against mining operations. This strategy, in turn, became a core symbol of the Mollo indigenous community's struggle to protect their living space.

For the Mollo community, weaving is not merely a domestic economic activity or a cultural tradition passed down through generations; it is a balanced connection between humankind and the environment. The thread is made from cotton grown by the community, and the dyes are extracted from various plants found in the forests surrounding Mount Mutis. Thus, the survival of the weaving tradition is inextricably linked to the conservation of the land, forests, water and ecosystem diversity that provide its raw materials. The decline of mining operations signals that the environmental area on which this cultural practice depends is exhausted.

In this sense, the activity of weaving in the mining area has a meaning that goes beyond the simple preservation of a tradition. Weaving becomes a way to send a message that environmental destruction not only causes economic damage for the community, but also threatens the survival of their cultural identity. In the mining field, the Mollo women brought in their culture and transformed an everyday cultural practice into a form of political communication capable of criticizing exploitative models of development.

From a feminist political ecology perspective, this activity shows how women's ecological experiences can be translated into political action through local knowledge and cultural symbols. Weaving represents the connection between women, nature and life. Therefore, when it is performed amidst the mining area, a space of economic exploitation changes into a space of political contestation. It means that weaving activity transforms the face of the mining field, from a sole production site to an

arena for contesting the legitimacy of natural resource exploitation.

The strategy also shows how Mollo women draw on cultural identity to legitimise their movement. They oppose mining not through abstract ideological narratives but through cultural symbols that are well understood by the Indigenous community. This strategy obtained significant support because the fight to protect the environment was seen as part of the effort to defend traditional customs, rather than merely serving the interests of one group. The weaving was also a means of political communication, reaching a broader audience than merely establishing internal legitimacy. As national and international media highlighted hundreds of women weaving in and out of the mining area, the media coverage broadened the support base from civil society organisations, academics, environmental activists and the international community. This subsequently exerted moral pressure on local government and mining companies. It shows that a local cultural symbol was successfully transformed into a political tool to embrace public attention, transcending the Mollo community.

More importantly, this strategy was pursued through nonviolent resistance. The Mollo women did not resort to destructive actions against mining facilities. Instead, they defended their living space through peaceful cultural activities. Thus, the movement's moral standing was enhanced, showing that the indigenous community was not opposed to development per se, but to developments that overlooked environmental sustainability and indigenous rights. The selection of a nonviolent strategy

also lowered the risk of the movement being criminalized as an anarchic act, despite ongoing intimidation, violence and threats against activists from vested interests in the mining operations.

From the perspective of social movement theory, this weaving action is an instance of symbolic politics. It involves the use of symbols, cultural identities, and social practices to forge collective meaning within a movement (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). These cultural symbols positioned the mining conflict not only as an economic issue, but as an issue of ecological justice, indigenous rights and the sustainability of life itself. By establishing this framework of meaning, the Mollo women were able to expand the movement's base of support and increase the legitimacy of their struggle in the eyes of the public and the government.

Further, the act of weaving signifies a shift in the meaning of women's domestic labor. In patriarchal societies, weaving is usually regarded as a private household domain. Yet the Mollo women's movement has shifted this activity to the public sphere and politicized it as a form of resistance to the exploitation of natural resources. The findings highlight women's cultural practices, which serve both to sustain community identity and to act as a weapon for political mobilization towards environmental justice. Instead of being seen as a mere cultural practice, weaving becomes a form of symbolic politics that transforms mining sites into sites of resistance for Mollo women by expressing their indigenous identity, encouraging moral support, attracting greater public interest, and strengthening community

unity. This study shows that local culture is more than a tradition; it can serve as political capital to support the movement against resource exploitation. This adds to feminist political ecology by showing that women's cultural practices can turn ecological knowledge into strong political advocacy.

Negotiating Patriarchy in the Mollo Women's Movement

A significant finding of this study is the shift in the gender-based division of roles that occurred during the resistance movement against marble mining. During the protest, about 150 women went to the mining site and remained there for almost a year. While the women of Mollo were away, the men of Mollo had to take care of domestic responsibilities. They did various chores, including cooking, housekeeping, caring for the children, and feeding the livestock. They took on these responsibilities to support Mollo women in fighting for their lands.

This phenomenon shows that the movement of Mollo women was more than a form of resistance against environmental damage resulting from mining activities. This movement was also about transforming the patriarchal practices that divided the roles of men and women in society. In everyday life, the Timorese communities, including the Mollo people, usually have a strict division of labor between men and women. Women take care of household activities, and men are more involved in the public sphere. When the community was in trouble because of environmental exploitation, this gender division of labor became more flexible. During the

protest, they shifted to what the whole community needed.

These findings suggest that the Mollo women's movement was not aimed at replacing male dominance but at negotiating the division of gender roles during the struggle. Men's support for domestic tasks implies a contextual reconstruction of gender roles in service of a common goal: the safeguarding of the indigenous community's living space. This shift is therefore not to be understood as an attempt to reverse the relations of power between men and women, but rather as a form of cooperation based on the community's collective interests.

The Feminist Political Ecology perspective sees this change as an illustration of the fluidity of gender relations, which are influenced by social, cultural, and environmental contexts (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Women's roles in the environmental movement were not the result of innate biological traits, but of their social experiences in the management of natural resources. Men adapted their roles to keep the wheel of household life spinning and to support the ongoing movement when women became the main actors in preserving the environment from exploitation. This finding emphasizes how division of labor between men and women is a negotiable social construct when a community is threatened with its survival.

In addition, men's participation in domestic work signifies the legitimacy of Mollo women's struggle, not only among women but also among male members of society. This support proves that environmental issues were successfully transformed into a common concern that transcended gender boundaries. It also means that the movement's success was not based on antagonism between women and

men, but rather on social solidarity, which united all members of the indigenous community in the struggle to preserve living space.

These findings challenge the assumption that women's movements are always characterized by confrontational opposition to patriarchal structures. In Mollo, patriarchy was contested not only through open conflict but also through social negotiation, which permitted a redistribution of roles to meet the movement's needs. Perceived as a collective responsibility to protect the environment, the community progressively built cohesion rather than treating it as a burden endured solely by women. The shift in gender roles within the resistance movement signalled partnership between men and women instead of competition.

The redistribution of roles reinforced the movement's mobilization capacity, as the social movement perspective emphasizes. Men's willingness to take on household tasks enabled women to participate in collective action without sacrificing their family duties. This support was crucial to sustaining the weaving protest for nearly a year. Thus, the success of the Mollo women's movement depended not only on Aleta Baun's leadership or the symbolic power of the weaving protest, but also on the community's capacity to create cooperative mechanisms that allowed members to play complementary roles.

This research contributes to feminist political ecology by demonstrating that gender roles can change as a consequence of attempts to protect the environment. The Mollo

community's struggle for environmental protection revolutionized the relationship between people and nature and the way men and women cooperate with each other. This movement proves that successful environmental advocacy depends not only on women's mobilization but also on the community's willingness to reconfigure gender roles to accomplish shared goals.

Transforming the Movement toward Electoral Politics

Despite the success of the Mollo women's movement in halting marble mining activities, the indigenous community's efforts to preserve their environment did not end there. Aleta Baun believed that the threat of natural resource exploitation could still arise through government policies or the issuance of new mining permits. Hence, the discontinuation of mining operations did not solve the more fundamental problem. This, then, led to a strategic shift, in which community-level resistance was pursued through formal political channels. This attempt aimed to influence policymaking processes, marked by her decision to run in the 2014 legislative election as a candidate for the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), representing the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa/PKB). She joined the PKB mainly because it was a "green party", which she believed to be pro-environment by nature. Her deep concern for the state of nature and the environment in her land encouraged her to enter the political arena. Her focus on these issues was driven by her connection to the natural landscape, which had

served as both a playground and the source of her parents' livelihood. Witnessing the degradation of nature and the environment fuelled her determination to address these problems as a policymaker. She believes that nature and the environment hold the key to life; without them, human beings cannot thrive. This is particularly true for the people of East Nusa Tenggara, whose lives depend heavily on natural resources: water, soil, stone, and forests. Health, education, and the economy lose their meaning without a healthy natural environment. If the environment is healthy and livable, food security, health, political stability, and economic prosperity can be achieved.

Health issues would diminish, as access to nutritious food fosters intelligence and creativity, ultimately enabling successful educational outcomes. Aleta Baun's introduction to the PKB occurred after she received the Goldman Environmental Prize from the Goldman Environmental Foundation in San Francisco, California, in 2014. PKB invited Aleta Baun to join the party as an official and member for the 2014 election. She accepted the offer and, during the campaign, told the public – her constituents—that PKB was not an Islamic party but rather a nationalist one committed to environmental causes. PKB had never previously secured a legislative seat in East Nusa Tenggara, specifically in the East Nusa Tenggara VIII electoral district (South Central Timor Regency); but Aleta Baun was confident that, with the loyalty of her supporters, she could win a seat running under the PKB banner. As a person renowned in South Central Timor Regency, Aleta Baun had social capital that benefited her greatly: public trust. This reduced the challenges she faced within the electoral

district, which naturally made her a prominent figure for the party.

Her decision to enter the political sphere signals the transformation of indigenous struggle. Aleta Baun emphasized that the involvement of women in legislative bodies is indispensable for making sure indigenous interests and environmental protection have a voice in the policy-making process. This means that her involvement in the political arena is not the end of the social movement, but the continuation of the struggle.

The decision indicates a strategic shift in the movement of Mollo women. Previously, mass mobilization, demonstrations, occupation of mining sites, and pressure on local government were the main forms of action. Such strong social legitimacy, then, became the basis for a strategy to seek political representation through electoral democratic mechanisms. Consequently, the movement moved beyond relying solely on street politics (contentious politics) and began engaging in institutional politics through representative legislative bodies.

Aleta Baun's success in winning a seat on the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) is inseparable from the social capital she cultivated while leading the Mollo women's movement. Over more than a decade, she built trust among indigenous communities by defending their living spaces, supporting local communities, and organizing women across various villages. The social networks established through the Attaemamus Indigenous Organization (OAT) – as well as groups of women weavers, farmers, livestock herders, and indigenous community members – formed a base of political support that bolstered

her electability in the legislative election (Bayo, 2021). In other words, the social capital generated by the social movement was converted into political capital for electoral competition.

From the perspective of social movement theory, this process illustrates the institutionalization of a social movement –a strategic shift from extra-state collective action toward participation in formal political institutions. Institutionalization does not mean the movement loses its identity as an indigenous movement; rather, it expands the arena of struggle from the public sphere to the legislative sphere. Through this mechanism, the demands of indigenous communities gain the opportunity to be translated into public policies with legal force.

Within feminist political ecology, this transformation also shows that women act not only as agents of environmental preservation at the community level but also as political actors capable of bringing indigenous ecological experiences into the decision-making process. The ecological knowledge previously used to mobilize the community became a source of political legitimacy when Aleta Baun entered the legislature. Thus, women's experience in managing the environment did not remain merely local knowledge but evolved into a foundation for shaping the political agenda on environmental protection.

Aleta Baun's entry into the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) also demonstrates a "scale shift" in the struggle (Tarrow, 2011). While the struggle previously focused solely on

the mining area in Mollo, the legislative platform enabled the environmental protection issue to expand into an agenda covering other regions of East Nusa Tenggara –including Flores, Sumba, Rote, and Sabu –which also face pressures from natural resource exploitation. This scale shift showed that the indigenous movement was able to shift from a concentration on local interests to provincial-level policy advocacy.

Yet, this institutionalization of the movement was not problem-free. The move into the formal political arena meant dealing with political party dynamics, legislative processes, political compromises, and the dominance of actors with economic development agendas. Given these circumstances, Aleta Baun had to adapt her advocacy approach. Instead of exerting pressure through mass action, she fought in the parliamentary arena through political communication, inter-factional lobbying, articulation of indigenous aspirations, and oversight of environmental regulation drafting. This strategy allowed her to stick to the ultimate goal i.e. to fight for the protection of the living spaces of indigenous people.

The study shows how the Mollow women's movement succeeded not only in halting mining but also in translating social support into political representation (Parastasia, 2024). It also provides evidence that social movements do not end when actors achieve their immediate aims. They can evolve into more formal political struggle via elections. Therefore, electoral politics is not the end goal; instead, it is a means of expanding advocacy and enhancing environmental protection through public policy.

Strengthening the study of social movements and women's political representation, this study shows that attempts to institutionalize indigenous movements have enabled the transformation of local experiences, ecological knowledge, and cultural legitimacy into political influence within a democratic system of governance. Aleta Baun and the Mollo women exemplify how acts of resistance within indigenous-led environmental movements can become more sustainable political advocacy through democratic institutions.

Environmental Political Advocacy and Its Limitations

Aleta Baun's political role in the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) opened a new pathway for environmental political advocacy. Through formal government mechanisms, she pursued parliamentary struggles through legislative processes, oversight, political communication, and inter-faction lobbying. Unlike previous strategies that emphasized collective action by indigenous communities – such as demonstrations and public pressure – this shift in arena shows that the struggle also requires actors able to influence the formulation of public policy on environmental protection, rather than relying solely on public mobilization.

Aleta Baun consistently placed environmental protection and indigenous rights at the top of her political agenda. One of her key achievements during her tenure as a member of the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial DPRD (2014-2019) was advocating the enactment of East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2016 on Environmental Management and Protection. She engaged in extensive

communication and lobbying with faction and commission leaders to secure political support and ensure the regulation's swift passage. She fulfilled her role through discussions with fellow PKB members in the Regional Legislative Formation Agency (Bapemperda) and the PKB faction, as well as informal communication and off-site meetings with six other female legislators. She also emphasized the importance of preserving customary lands in East Nusa Tenggara, fostered understanding of the human-nature relationship through local East Nusa Tenggara philosophies, and advocated ecofeminist education.

Such experience shows that policy advocacy within a legislative body encompasses more than formal positions within the council's organizational structure. It requires the ability to build networks, strengthen political negotiation, and utilise the social capital gained from the leadership of indigenous movements. This pattern reflects a shift in struggle, from direct pressure on the government to persuasion and negotiation within the representative body.

This study also found that although entry into parliament is achieved, it does not guarantee substantive policy changes. The low level of female representation in the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) remains the main challenge. In the 2014 election, for instance, there were only six women out of sixty-five DPRD members. This situation had a more serious impact: cases concerning women, indigenous people, and the environment were less prioritized compared to other issues within the regional legislative agenda. In addition, a development orientation that emphasizes

economic expansion at the expense of environmental preservation has added to the slowed advocacy efforts.

This is evident in the experience of Aleta Baun herself. She asserted that women's perspectives are frequently belittled compared with other developmental concerns during decision-making.

"In my opinion, the obstacles are numerous. First, women's voices continue to be sidelined, either in the decision-making process or in areas related to them. Their views are often overlooked, especially in decision-making. Even when matters regarding women are voiced in local regulations or policies, they continue to be regarded as ordinary ones." (Interview with Aleta Baun, July 21, 2019).

This statement embraces culturally related challenges rather than solely institutional ones. From the standpoint of women's political representation, this reflects what is known as descriptive representation. It implies that the simple presence of women in political institutions doesn't necessarily lead to substantive representation –the actual capacity to affect the content and direction of public policy. Within this context, a political culture dominated by patriarchal values does not automatically result in increased influence over decision-making processes, even when a woman is present in parliament.

Further, this study identifies that there are at least two main challenges faced by Aleta Baun: (1) Structural barriers; the low number of female legislators who advocate for environmental issues tends to provide weak political support for succeeding environmental

protection agendas. (2) Cultural barriers; an existing development paradigm considers natural resource exploitation as the main driving force of regional economic growth. This pushes environmental issues to a secondary position below investment interests and the economic growth agenda.

From the perspective of feminist political ecology, this situation implies that gender, the environment, and power extend beyond the accomplishment of women entering political institutions. Women continuously need to fight for a fair space to advocate environmental agendas, which is constrained by long-standing power structures. This means that women's political struggles revolve around two big goals to bridge the challenges: first, enhancing the number of women's representation in legislative bodies; and second, transforming the norms, values, and policy orientations that are relatively in favor of economic interests over ecological sustainability.

However, these limitations do not necessarily diminish the importance of Aleta Baun's role in the Mollo indigenous movement. She is a legislator who can connect grassroots communities to government institutions. Her position allows her to strengthen environmental struggles through official mechanisms, such as public hearings, formal submissions to the local government, regulatory deliberations, and oversight of the implementation of environmental policy. Hence, indigenous aspirations, which were expressed mostly in the form of demonstrations, are brought to the level of advocacy for environmental policies within political

institutions. This highlights Aleta Baun's strategic presence in parliament to open new avenues of advocacy without diminishing the importance of community-level mobilization.

The findings indicate that the institutionalization of social movements is a complex process. The success of a movement in gaining access to political institutions is not an automatic sign of success in changing public policy. Political advocacy, instead, involves a long process of negotiation, coalition-building, and the capacity to take advantage of existing political opportunities. In this sense, the Mollo women's movement demonstrates that changes in environmental policy result from the entanglement of extra-parliamentary indigenous mobilization and parliamentary political advocacy. It emphasizes that the success of environmental struggles does not derive from a single strategy.

Theoretically, these findings add to the literature on social movements, women's political representation, and feminist political ecology by demonstrating that the shift into electoral politics is not the culmination of the struggle. Instead, it is a new stage with its own challenges. The success of indigenous movements is not measured solely by their success in winning political seats. The degree to which such representation translates into policies that protect indigenous rights and environmental sustainability also counts for reaching the ultimate environmental goals. Aleta Baun's narratives illustrate the gradual process of achieving environmental protection goals in a more sustainable way, encompassing the synergy among grassroots activism, political representation, and structural policy changes.

Nonetheless, substantive policy change is not automatically achieved through political representation upon successful entry into parliament. Structural barriers stemming from the low number of female legislators and prioritized economic development agendas have hindered efforts to tackle environmental issues. In other words, this study suggests that the successful transformation of a social movement into political bodies is not automatically followed by success in influencing the legislative process.

A Transformative Model of the Mollo Women's Movement: From Ecological Resistance to Environmental Political Advocacy

The previous discussion confirms that the movement of Mollo women cannot be reduced to mere resistance to marble mining activities. It reflects a gradual process of transformation driven by the interaction of various elements: gendered ecological knowledge, the mobilization of indigenous communities, the use of cultural practices as symbolic politics, the negotiation of gender relations, and the expansion of the struggle into electoral politics and environmental policy advocacy. Based on the research findings, this process can be translated into a transformation model of indigenous women's movements, as shown in Figure 1.

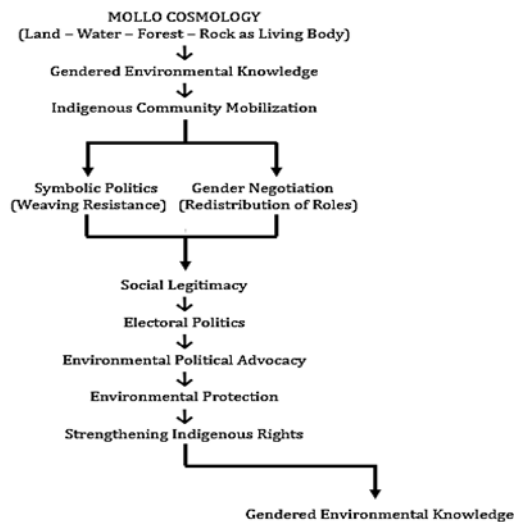


Figure 1. A Transformative Model of the Mollo Women's Movement: From Ecological Resistance to Environmental Political Advocacy
 Source: *Developed by the author based on the findings of this study*

The model illustrates the transformation of the Mollo women's movement, which unfolded in six interconnected stages. The initial stage is gendered environmental knowledge. It was constructed through women's experiences managing natural resources and through the Mollo cosmology, in which land, water, forests, and stones form an inseparable ecosystem of community life. This knowledge became the basis for a collective consciousness to defend the indigenous community's living space.

This consciousness was translated into the mobilization of indigenous people, legitimized by support from customary structures, community leaders, and civil society networks. The mobilization was strengthened through the politics of weaving. This cultural practice encompasses symbolic politics that function as a

political communication strategy. It also transformed household activities into symbols of resistance to environmental exploitation. Simultaneously, the movement triggered a renegotiation of gender relations, in which women played leading roles, and men took some domestic responsibilities in support of the protest.

The process leads to the next stage, electoral politics. The shared experience and social legitimacy developed within the movement served as capital to strengthen Aleta Baun's legislative position in the East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD). Political representation broadened the scope of the struggle beyond community-based collective action. The focus shifted toward environmental policy advocacy, encompassing legislative processes, political communication, and the monitoring of public policy. The process illustrates how an indigenous movement can evolve from local resistance to more institutionalized policy advocacy, despite various structural and cultural barriers.

This transformation model is a conceptual contribution to feminist political ecology, social movement studies, and women's political representation. It illustrates a continuous, transformative process that connects ecological knowledge, cultural identity, collective mobilization, political representation, and policy advocacy. It also attests that the success of the Indigenous women's movement cannot be understood solely through resistance to environmental exploitation. Therefore, this model serves as an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of Indigenous

women's movements amid natural resource conflicts in Indonesia and other regions with similar contexts.

The transformation model suggests that ecological knowledge, cultural identity, collective action, symbolic politics, political representation, and policy advocacy are mutually supportive rather than following a linear path. The Mollo women's movement notably united these elements, demonstrating how indigenous communities' experiences with the environment can have real influence on public policy.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the Mollo women's movement is an indigenous social movement that has evolved gradually from ecological resistance to environmental political advocacy. The movement is grounded in the Mollo people's ecological knowledge. They view land, stone, water, and forests as integral to the identity and survival of their indigenous community. This ecological consciousness formed the basis for collective mobilization against marble exploitation, perceived as a threat to their living space.

The leadership of Aleta Baun was not the only driving force behind the success of the Mollo women's movement as it was also supported by customary structures, collective identity, and community solidarity. Weaving activities at the mining site represent the transformation of cultural practices into symbolic politics that affirm the movement's moral legitimacy and attract public attention to the environmental conflict. In addition, the struggle also effected a renegotiation of gender roles. Women held a central role in collective

action, while men took on some domestic tasks to support the protection of the indigenous community. These findings reveal that the Mollo women's movement was not established due to antagonistic relations with men; instead, it was built on partnership and community solidarity.

Moreover, this study shows that the social movement's success did not end with the cessation of mining activities but evolved into the movement's institutionalization through electoral politics. Aleta Baun is a portrait of a figure who used the social capital she built by leading the indigenous movement and transformed it into political capital to enter the legislature. This position provided a secure formal channel for indigenous struggle by influencing the policymaking process, including advocating for East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Regulation Number 4 of 2016 on Environmental Management and Protection. Further, the study emphasizes that political representation does not automatically translate into substantive policy changes due to structural barriers, i.e., low representation of women and a strong emphasis on economic development in the decision-making process.

Theoretically, this study contributes to feminist political ecology, social movement studies, and women's political representation by showing how indigenous women's ecological experiences can translate into collective mobilization, symbolic politics, and political advocacy through democratic institutions. Beyond grassroots resistance or parliamentary representation, the narrative of Mollo women highlights key elements of environmental protection: the ongoing interconnection among community mobilization, cultural legitimacy, and policy advocacy. The transformation model

presented here offers insight into the dynamics of the Mollo women's movement and an analytical lens for understanding the transformation of indigenous women's

movements in the struggle for ecological justice and political representation across diverse contexts of natural resource conflict in Indonesia.

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