

Survival Strategies Of "Baro Scavenger" Women During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Sawahlunto

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Abstract. This article describes the survival strategies of the "Mulung Baro" ("Coal Scavenger") women during the Covid-19 pandemic in the city of Sawahlunto. In addition, the article analyzes the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the households of "Coal Scavenger" women. The involvement of women in mining activities is quite striking. Until now, mining has been perceived as a male-dominated role. However, in the mines of Sawahlunto, women are found scavenging for coal. This scavenging role is performed primarily by women, who are known as "Mulung Baro." Due to the reduced workforce for both men and women in Sawahlunto throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, residents of Sawahlunto, especially women, have become increasingly at-risk of falling below the poverty line, especially women. This is exacerbated by mining company regulations which prohibit women from involvement in mining activities. These mining companies' regulations are directly tied to the policies enacted by Sawahlunto City's local government prohibiting scavenging and digging for coal outside the mines. As a result, women are provided few opportunities for mining work, and coupled with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the income of their households, they are struggling financially. This article is a gender-based applied anthropological approach which relies on qualitative methods that are descriptive and holistic. This article is a case study of the "Mulung Baro" women in Sawahlunto. The data collection techniques employed include literature review, in-depth interviews, participant-observation, life stories, and Focus Group Discussion. The data are analyzed according to qualitative descriptive methods. The findings shed light on the varied efforts and strategies undertaken by the "Coal Scavenger" women to sustain the livelihoods of their households. The strategies of the "Coal Scavenger" women include: a) developing new skills in order to provide secondary sources of income such as: massaging massage therapy, baking and selling cakes or snacks, cooking for wedding events as day laborers, b) decreasing household spending, and c) performing jobs usually not undertaken by women, such as serving as neighborhood security in the nagari (village). In conclusion, "Coal Scavenger" women undertake various strategies as housewives in order to sustain their households. This includes doing jobs normally viewed as reserved for men, such as working for neighborhood security. In fact, these "Coal Scavengers" are accustomed to jobs with inherent risks, leading them to have already exercised 'faith' when faced with any workplace hazards. The main goal of "Mulung Baro" women is increasing household income in order to provide for the needs of their children and other family members during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Strategy, Survival, Covid-19 Pandemic, Pemulung Baro, Household Income

1 Introduction

Indonesia has a long and rich history in mining. Mining by hand has not simply been a matter of extracting natural resources from the ground, it has also provided a rich historical record for the life of the nation. Research on coal mining in Sawahlunto has been conducted primarily from 1892-1996, a period covering the past century. Throughout this period, we meet the miners who lived during the Dutch colonialization of Sawahlunto as well as their descendants, putting together the various puzzle pieces that form the life living history of a mine hundreds of meters below the ground.

The Ombilin Mine is the oldest coal mining site and the only underground coal mine in Indonesia. Ombilin Mine is located in Sawahlunto, one of the cities in the Province of West Sumatra, about 95 kilometers northeast of Padang City. The city of Sawahlunto is known as the City of Mines or the City of Coal and is known colloquially as “Little Netherlands”. Currently, coal mining itself is rarely undertaken and plays little role in the general life of the city of Sawahlunto. However, in 2019, Sawahlunto was designated as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site which brought to the forefront new possibilities with heritage tourism based on the history of Sawahlunto, its landscape and cultural sites.

The presence of women within mining activities is quite striking. In Indonesia, mining activities are generally undertaken by males. However, at the mine in Sawahlunto, women work as scavengers hunting for coal that is scattered around the mining sites. The women primarily scavenge for coal outside the mine by sifting through soil discarded by bulldozers outside the mine as well as coal that has fallen along the route taken by dump trucks transporting the coal. At the dump sites, dozens of these “Mulung Baro” (coal scavenger) women wait eagerly to sift through the discarded soil for splinters and fragments of coal. Once the soil is dumped, the women scramble to quickly look for coal before the next load arrives, work that is dangerous and poses great risk to their safety.

The Covid-19 pandemic has catalyzed changes in the social and economic situation of families in Sawahlunto, precipitating new marginalized groups with multiple vulnerabilities. The economic downturn increased the population of those vulnerable to falling below the poverty line and brought new vulnerabilities to the already poor populations.

In Sawahlunto City in 2017, the number of poor people in 2017 people in poverty was recorded at 337,682.000. However, the number of those living below the poverty line increased in 2018 to 354,665.00 and was further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, reaching 374,615.00. Based on records from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there continues to exist within Sawahlunto City groups that are vulnerable to falling into poverty. This is an increase of those living within the Temporary Poverty Line (BPS, 2020).

Due to the reduced workforce for both men and women in Sawahlunto throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, residents of Sawahlunto have become increasingly at-risk of falling below the poverty line. The data indicates that the overall reduction in the workforce is borne primarily by women working in the informal sector, especially those selling wares out of the home or scavenging for coal. These women are the most vulnerable group and make up a significant number of those who have fallen below the poverty line. This is exacerbated by mining company regulations which prohibit women from involvement in mining activities. These mining companies’ regulations are directly tied to the policies enacted by Sawahlunto city’s local government prohibiting scavenging and digging for coal outside the mines. Women are rarely involved in the decisions made related to mining.

As a result, women are provided few opportunities for mining work, and coupled with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the income of their households, they are financially vulnerable. This impact is greatest on women whose primary work has been collecting and scavenging for coal, and their survival strategies need to be studied more deeply. This study aims to describe the strategies employed by "Mulung Baro" (coal scavenger) women to support their family's income and sustain their households.

2 Methodology

The research was conducted in Sawahlunto City, in the province of West Sumatra. The basis for choosing this site is due to its location as the oldest and only underground coal mining site in Indonesia. This region received recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2019 due to its coal mining history and this site was chosen because of due to the presence of women taking part in coal mining activities.

The research uses a qualitative approach and is a case study on women who collect coal in Sawahlunto. It aims to maintain the wholeness of the object, thus the data collected is are studied as an integrated whole (holistically). The qualitative methods used include: literature review, in-depth interviews, participant-observation, life stories, and Field Group Discussion (FGD). These details can only be obtained by talking directly to the community, visiting their homes or workplaces and asking them to tell stories (Creswell, 2013:64)

This research is based on a feminist ethnographic approach. According to Judith Dilorio, feminist ethnography is research carried out by feminists, focusing on gender issues in traditional or non-traditional homogeneous research settings, and in heterogeneous traditional and non-traditional research settings. In feminist ethnography the researchers are women, the place of research is sometimes the world of women, and the main informants are especially women (Reinharz, 2005: 75).

Feminist ethnographers seek to reveal the problematic nature of "I" authorship, comparing opposing reports, readers, and fields of expertise to emphasize the partial and processual nature of all ethnographic writing (eg, Wolf, 1992). Abu-Lughod developed a new feminist ethnography, arguing that in anthropology there is little acknowledgment of the ambiguous intermediate status shared by many researchers because "in anthropology there is a unified assumption that we are outside" (Abu-Lughod). Lughod, 1986).

The data of this research were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive method. Lastly, the research is activism research. This research activism was done in collaboration with Women in Mining and Energy, an NGO providing advocacy on gender in mining and the energy sector.

3 Result and Discussion

In the pre-pandemic period, the "Mulung Baro" women rarely worked supplemental jobs. Prior to the pandemic, Mrs. Paini, who is 54-years old, worked as a coal scavenger and was responsible for her three children and four grandchildren. Aside from scavenging, to increase her household's income, she also sold food on the side. Her income prior to the pandemic was Rp. 4.000.000,- per month. Because her husband was not making enough to support the family, Mrs. Paini decided to take on more work. Her household's fixed expenses amount to Rp. 600.000 per week, with an added Rp 10.000 per week for the arisan (a community savings

collective). With her total household expenses coming to Rp 610.000 per week, or Rp 2.440.000 per month, Mrs. Pains was still able to set aside money for savings.

Due to the pandemic, Mrs. Pains's work as a coal scavenger has been halted. In addition to the pandemic, the government has come out with regulations banning coal mining. With the added difficulty of finding work during the pandemic, Mrs. Pains struggles to meet her household's needs. In light of this, Mrs. Pains, who is trained in traditional massage, decided to work as a massage therapist. When weddings are held, Mrs. Pains will also supplement her income by cooking for the day, a custom known as *rewang*. She leads a group of four women who cook for two days and are paid Rp 2.500.000. The income is then split between the four women. As weddings do not provide constant consistent income, Mrs. Pains also works as a massage therapist. With a weekly income of Rp 400.000 to Rp 600.000 per week, she does not set the cost of a massage therapy session as she desires to help her clients without setting the price.

Case I : Mrs. Pains



Before the pandemic

After the pandemic

Nonselective in Their Work

During the pandemic, "Mulung Baro" women are nonselective in their work as long as it is halal (permissible in Islam). This includes performing work usually undertaken by men. An example of this is the case of Mrs. Dona, who began to work as a neighborhood security officer during the pandemic. Dona grew up in the area of Taratak Bancah in Sawahlunto City, above the hills and bordering Solok District. Her parents have been active in small-scale mining all her life, and Dona was accustomed to mining from a young age as she followed in her parent's footsteps. However, recently Dona and her family are no longer able to work in the mines due to various environmental conditions and regulations related to mining. As such, Dona works various jobs including tapping rubber on her family's land and as a hired security guard for the village (Linmas).

Case II : Mrs. Dona



Before the pandemic

After the pandemic

Reducing Household Expenditures

During the pandemic, household expenses have become increasingly tight. In general, the "Mulung Baro" women are selective about household spending. Here is the case of Mrs. Puji:

Before the pandemic, Mrs. Puji is the mother of two children and works for a food stall that serves breakfast, including: pecel, bubur kacang hijau (mung bean porridge), and lontong. She has been working there for two years. The food stall is located on the side of the road on the route taken by the coal scavengers at the mine. According to Puji, who is 35 years-old, prior to the pandemic many coal scavengers would pass by and eat at the stall.

After the pandemic, it is clear that sales have fallen as fewer coal scavengers are working. Puji notes that sales average 40 portions a day, having fallen from 60 portions prior to the pandemic. The current sales that have continued are not from the regular coal scavengers who used to frequent the stall. Having worked for two years for Mrs. Desa (the wife of the village headleader), Puji receives a salary of Rp 900.000 per month. She is grateful for the salary considering that working part-time leaves her available for other work. The stall owner often lets Puji return home with food from the stall as she ends her daily shift. When in need of a loan, Puji can borrow from Mrs. Desa and repayment is taken out of her next month's pay. In addition to this, Puji also receives a bonus of Rp 250.000 before the major holidays.

Case III : Mrs. Puji



Source : Primary Data, 2021

These coal scavenger jobs are largely performed by women. Even when men are involved, most males are children or husbands of female scavengers who have no other choice of work. The findings show the indomitable spirit of these coal scavengers. Their work as "Mulung Baro" is a testament to their resilience as women. These women leave the home for dangerous work to provide for their families.

While also playing the important role as mother, these women take on an additional role of head of household. Tirelessly scavenging for flakes of 'black gold,' they sift through piles of soil under the scorching heat, all the while being bathed in the dust from trucks traveling to and fro. All they can dream of in the midst of a bleak future is being a mother for to their kids. They cling to it, their role as bundo (birth mother) in a culture which ties them down has become a bleak future.

This is a snapshot of the modern woman, those squashed under the burdens of life. The pandemic surprisingly has returned them to domestic and public work. They have become indifferent towards work, picking any job that is halal as long as it can provide an income for their struggling households. The pandemic has become the type of ecological condition which

creates the necessity for such women to simply “survive”. While the pandemic has halted much activity, their main concern remains whether their children have food to eat.

4 Conclusion

Women have the ability to support their households. During the adverse conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing numbers of women in Sawahlunto took over their husband’s role as the household’s main provider of income. This reality was due, in part, to the dramatic increase in male unemployment.

“Coal Scavenger” women in Sawahlunto undertake various strategies as housewives in order to sustain their households. This includes performing jobs normally viewed as reserved for men, such as working for neighborhood security and community protection. The ability of the “Mulung Baro” women in Sawahlunto to survive the economic demands of their households is largely due to their resiliency formed by t and trained soul with pre-pandemic working conditions as coal scavengers. This is what causes these women to be strong while facing the difficulties of household needs. These ecological conditions have shaped these women to be mentally and physically strong.

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