

Social Inclusion and Informal Recruitment in Women-Led Microenterprises: A Case Study from South Sulawesi, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores informal recruitment practices and their contribution to social inclusion in women-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study approach through in-depth interviews and field observations, the research reveals that recruitment based on trust, kinship, and social networks opens access to employment for marginalized groups such as women with low educational backgrounds, single mothers, and those excluded from the formal labor market. These mechanisms function not only as efficiency strategies but also as instruments of socio-economic empowerment at the community level. However, the absence of formal contracts and social protection places workers in a vulnerable position. Findings further show that social capital, particularly family ties, fosters loyalty and solidarity while simultaneously limiting openness to external networks. On the other hand, digital transformation through social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok expands market reach, creates additional job opportunities, and supports broader social inclusion. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of informal recruitment, social capital, and digitalization dimensions in building the resilience of women-led MSMEs. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on human resource management in the informal sector; practically, it offers strategic recommendations for MSMEs and inclusive policies to strengthen gender-based economic resilience in the digital era.

Keywords: informal recruitment, social inclusion, women-led MSMEs, social capital, digital transformation

INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of the economy in many developing countries. Women-led MSMEs, in particular, play a crucial role in opening access to employment for vulnerable groups and supporting sustainable development, although the majority still operate in the informal sector. A study in India found that more than 90 percent of women entrepreneurs are engaged in the informal sector, contributing significantly to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, they continue to face barriers such as limited access to finance, technology, and labor protection (Rao, 2019.). Other global studies also emphasize that women entrepreneurs encounter structural challenges in the form of limited human resources, restrictive social norms, and minimal access to institutional support (Ubfal, 2024). In Africa, (Dlamini, 2022) shows that although microfinance programs increase women's participation in entrepreneurship, they remain vulnerable, highlighting the need to build resilience strategies to sustain their economic roles.

A similar phenomenon is found in Southeast Asia. The *Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia* (ERIA) reported that women-led MSMEs in Eastern Indonesia were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Low levels of digital literacy and limited access to finance exacerbated their vulnerabilities, although some managed to survive by leveraging digitalization opportunities (Marsan et al., 2022). At the national level, gender inclusion efforts are also reflected in community-based development research in Lombok, which highlights the importance of gender mainstreaming (UtamiCatharina, 2024), although the focus is not specifically on MSMEs.

According to recent data, around 57.5 percent of female workers in Indonesia are employed in the informal sector—higher than men at 48.8 percent. These workers often face unstable wages and minimal social protection, even though they play an important role in supporting both domestic economies and microenterprises (Women in Indonesia: Informal Employment, Wage Gap & Violence | Indonesia Investments, 2025 n.d.) This fact underscores the urgency of exploring informal recruitment practices as part of strategies for economic and social resilience.

Many previous studies have examined women's economic empowerment through access to capital, technology, or general empowerment programs. However, few have specifically highlighted informal recruitment mechanisms based on trust, kinship, and social networks, which in practice serve as an important entry point for women with limited formal education or skills to remain engaged in local economies.

From the perspective of *Social Capital Theory*, social capital is understood as a resource derived from relationships among individuals within social networks. (Coleman, 1988) emphasizes that social capital is manifested through trust, norms, and obligations that facilitate collective action. This framework is crucial for understanding how informal recruitment practices in women-led MSMEs in South Sulawesi operate not only as adaptive strategies to overcome resource constraints but also as social mechanisms that strengthen solidarity and expand access to employment for marginalized groups.

Based on this gap, this study aims to explore informal recruitment practices in women-led MSMEs in South Sulawesi, focusing on how trust- and network-based hiring opens access to work for marginalized groups, as well as its implications for labor protection, business innovation, and the sustainability of MSMEs amid increasingly digitalized economic dynamics.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design, deemed appropriate for exploring in depth the dynamics of informal recruitment within social, relational, and structural contexts. The case study enabled the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon through a women-led home-based microenterprise in South Sulawesi engaged in household clothing sales. This unit was selected because it represents women-led MSMEs with entirely informal, trust-based recruitment practices.

The research subjects consisted of one female MSME owner and ten workers recruited through social networks such as kinship ties, neighborhood connections, and personal recommendations. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who reflected non-formal recruitment practices and experiences of working in the informal sector. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting an average of 30–60 minutes per participant, and covered themes such as recruitment, work experiences, social protection, and digital adaptation. Field observations were conducted over three weeks, documenting interactions between the owner and workers, as well as production and sales activities, both offline and online.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis following the six phases outlined by (Braun and Clarke, 2006) transcribing and repeatedly reading the data to build initial understanding; (2) generating initial codes for relevant meaning units; (3) grouping codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing themes to ensure consistency with the data; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up the analysis in a narrative form. These steps ensured that the themes emerged authentically from participants' experiences and were meaningfully linked to the theoretical framework.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study applied source triangulation (comparing interview results with observations) and member checking (confirming findings and interpretations with participants). This approach ensured that the interpretations reflected the authentic experiences of the participants while strengthening the credibility of the study's findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Informal Recruitment as an Adaptive Mechanism of Women-led MSMEs

The interviews revealed that recruitment practices in women-led MSMEs in South Sulawesi operate in highly informal patterns. Business owners tend to rely on kinship networks, neighbors, or recommendations from close acquaintances. No job advertisements, online recruitment platforms, or written contracts were found. The main considerations in selecting workers were trust and social closeness, which were perceived as ensuring loyalty and business security.

This was confirmed by the owner:

"I feel more confident hiring people from my neighbors or relatives. At least I know their background, so I feel more secure." (Female MSME owner, interview, 2025).

From the workers' perspective, social ties were also the main reason they could gain employment, as expressed by one worker:

"If it weren't for being personally known, I probably wouldn't have been accepted. I don't have a high school diploma, but she trusted me because she has known me for years." (Worker, interview, 2025).

This tendency aligns with empirical evidence presented by (Tambunan, 2019), who emphasized that microenterprises in Indonesia predominantly rely on non-formal mechanisms due to limited capital, administrative skills, and access to technology. Tambunan also noted that about 43% of micro and small enterprises are owned by women, making informal recruitment a dominant phenomenon in gender-based MSMEs.

In terms of advantages, informal recruitment is faster and cheaper since it requires no advertising or complex selection processes. Moreover, workers recruited from the social environment tend to adapt more easily because they share common norms and values, supporting business stability.

One worker reflected:

"Working here feels easier to adjust because we already know each other. It's less awkward and quicker to understand the rules." (Worker, interview, 2025).

However, despite its effectiveness as an adaptive strategy, this pattern also has limitations. Field evidence showed that workers recruited through family or neighborhood ties often shared relatively homogeneous backgrounds and experiences. Such workforce homogeneity risks limiting diversity of ideas, reducing skill diversification, and eventually constraining innovation. This condition is consistent with (Okafor, 2022) social network discrimination model, which suggests that network-based recruitment may reinforce unequal access to employment.

In the context of women-led MSMEs in South Sulawesi, this implies that recruitment practices focused solely on close social circles may exclude potential workers from outside the community. If such practices persist, innovation and market expansion may become suboptimal, as businesses lose opportunities to absorb more diverse talents. Thus, while informal recruitment ensures efficiency and social security, the long-term sustainability of MSMEs requires diversifying recruitment strategies to remain competitive in increasingly dynamic markets.

2. Social Inclusion: MSMEs as Spaces for Empowering Vulnerable Groups

The interviews revealed that most workers came from groups traditionally excluded from the formal labor market, such as school dropouts and female heads of households. For them, women-led MSMEs not only provided a source of income but also created a space for empowerment, independence, and social recognition within their communities. In other words, MSMEs perform a dual role: as economic units and as arenas of social inclusion. One worker described how the opportunity to work in this MSME transformed her life:

"Before working here, I never had any income. Now I can help pay for my children's schooling. Even though it is not much, I feel more appreciated." (Worker, female head of household, interview, 2025).

For another worker, employment offered a chance to build confidence:

"I used to feel inferior because I only graduated from junior high school. But after working here, I became more confident because I can earn my own money and support my parents." (Worker, young woman, interview, 2025).

These findings illustrate how women-led MSMEs serve as an important space for social inclusion, where vulnerable groups not only gain income but also achieve social recognition. This aligns with the United Nations report (UN Women, 2023) which emphasized that women-led MSMEs serve two key functions: (1) creating accessible local employment, and (2) strengthening community-based social networks. Furthermore, research by (Ekaputri et al., 2025) highlighted that financial and social inclusion are essential in reducing gender-based vulnerabilities in Indonesia. This was also evident in the fieldwork, as expressed by one worker:

"With the salary I earn here, I can save little by little. I even managed to buy a motorbike, which makes it easier to take care of things or help my family." (Worker, interview, 2025).

This demonstrates that women-led MSMEs function as a vehicle for social mobility, enabling individuals from vulnerable groups to improve their economic and social status. Thus, women-led MSMEs are not only business entities absorbing labor but also multidimensional empowerment spaces economic, social, and psychological.

3. Social Capital and Family-like Relations

The interviews clearly revealed that the relationship between women MSME owners and their workers was not the same as the hierarchical superior-subordinate relationship typically found in larger companies. Instead, the relationship resembled that of a family, where trust, care, and solidarity served as the main foundations. The business owner not only gave work instructions but also showed personal concern for the workers' well-being. This created a warmer working environment filled with emotional bonds.

One worker explained how the business owner was always ready to help when financial difficulties arose:

"If I have money problems, the owner lends me money without interest. I feel very supported. I don't feel like just a worker, but more like her own child." (Worker, interview, 2025).

Daily interactions also reinforced this strong social closeness. They not only worked together but also shared moments beyond production activities:

"We often eat together after work. Sometimes, if there is extra income, the owner treats us. Once a year, she even takes us on a trip together. It feels like a big family, not like a company." (Worker, interview, 2025).

For the MSME owner, maintaining a family-like atmosphere was a strategy to build loyalty and a sense of belonging among workers:

"I consider them not just workers, but like close friends or even family. If our relationship is good, they will also be loyal. I believe a small business like this can survive precisely because of trust and togetherness." (MSME Owner, interview, 2025).

This emotional closeness made workers feel valued and comfortable. In fact, some admitted they stayed not only because of salary but because of the strong social bonds:

"The salary here isn't as high as in big companies, but the atmosphere is nice. If I have family problems, it's easy to get permission. I stay because I feel cared for." (Worker, interview, 2025).

This phenomenon is consistent with (Putnam, 2000) concept of bonding social capital, which refers to social ties built through trust, closeness, and solidarity within a group. In the context of women-led MSMEs, this bonding capital became a crucial social resource, compensating for the absence of formal structures such as work contracts or written regulations. However, overly dominant bonding capital also posed risks. Recruitment confined to the same social circles often resulted in a homogeneous workforce, limiting diversity of skills and ideas. One worker also acknowledged this:

"It's nice working here because of the family-like atmosphere, but when we face tasks requiring special skills, we often struggle. Most of us share the same background." (Worker, interview, 2025).

Such limitations affect business innovation capacity. MSMEs naturally require skill diversification to grow, especially when facing increasingly competitive market demands.(Okafor, 2022), through the social network discrimination model, also explained that recruitment based solely on social networks often creates inequality of access to work—excluding those outside the network, even if they are competent. At the same time, this situation creates a dilemma for workers. They feel safe in a supportive environment, but are also aware that the business may struggle to grow if it continues to rely only on internal networks:

"We are happy working here because it feels like family, but sometimes it feels like the business struggles to grow bigger. Maybe because new workers are always recruited from the same close circle." (Worker, interview, 2025).

Therefore, alongside bonding social capital, bridging social capital is also needed—the ability to build relationships with outsiders. According to (Harinurdin et al., 2025) sustainable community empowerment requires openness to innovation (open innovation), which connects internal strengths with external networks—for example, through collaboration with MSME associations, microfinance institutions, training centers, and digital technology utilization.

Thus, the field findings reveal a paradox. On the one hand, warm family-like relations and trust provide vital social capital for sustaining the business. On the other hand, without balancing this with openness to external networks, the business risks being trapped in a small circle that limits innovation, market expansion, and long-term growth. The best strategy for women-led MSMEs is to maintain the family-like atmosphere while actively building external connections whether with other communities, support institutions, or digital platforms. With this combination, MSMEs can not only survive in difficult times but also grow and compete in broader markets.

4. The Dilemma of Labor Protection in the Informal Sector: Between Flexibility and Vulnerability

The interviews revealed that in these women-led MSMEs, there were no written employment contracts between the owner and the workers. The working relationship was based solely on trust built through personal closeness. This provided a high degree of flexibility for both owners and workers. However, behind such flexibility lay significant vulnerability. One worker described her experience:

"We work without a contract. Everything is based on trust. If I need sudden leave for family matters, it's always granted. That makes me feel comfortable, but sometimes I worry—if the business suddenly closes or I'm dismissed, I don't know what to do." (Worker, interview, 2025).

For the MSME owner, the absence of a formal contract actually simplified management, as she did not have to deal with bureaucratic obligations:

"If we use written contracts, I feel it would be complicated. Here, we trust each other. If they work well, I will not harm them. I prefer this way because it's more flexible." (MSME Owner, interview, 2025).

Although lacking formal protection, the MSME owner still provided simple forms of safeguards, such as gradual salary increases, annual religious holiday bonuses (THR), and recreational activities. Workers perceived these as informal appreciation:

"Even though there's no contract, we always get a holiday bonus for Eid. Sometimes our salary is raised too. I feel appreciated, so it doesn't matter that there's no written agreement." (Worker, interview, 2025).

Flexibility also became one of the main attractions. Workers felt that the rules adjusted more easily to family needs:

"I once took a full week off because my child was sick. My salary wasn't deducted, and the owner even told me to just focus on my family. That made me feel very relieved." (Worker, interview, 2025).

Nevertheless, the weakness of this system was evident. Without contracts or legal guarantees, workers' positions remained fragile. They had no protection in cases of sudden dismissal or workplace accidents. One worker admitted her concern:

"If suddenly something happens and I'm dismissed, I can't demand anything. So, even though it feels like family here, we never feel completely secure." (Worker, interview, 2025).

This condition reflects the classic dilemma of the informal sector: a friendly and flexible working environment, but weak in terms of legal and economic protection. These findings are consistent with the report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) which states that informal workers in many countries are often trapped in cycles of *"low-paid jobs without social protection."* While flexibility offers short-term benefits, the absence of basic protection makes workers vulnerable to economic shocks and global crises.

In Indonesia, research by (Junaidi et al., 2023) on informal sector households in Jambi found similar patterns: workers survived through family economic strategies, but without formal social protection, they remained vulnerable and at risk of falling back into poverty during crises. Interestingly, some workers valued the family-like working environment more than formal protection. One worker explained:

"For me, the most important thing is fairness and being respected. Here, we feel close and treated equally. Even without contracts, I feel more comfortable here than working in a big factory with strict rules." (Worker, interview, 2025).

This aligns with (Madison et al., 2022) who emphasized that in women-led MSMEs, labor protection is not always present in the form of written contracts, but rather through relational fairness a sense of justice, mutual trust, and solidarity among members. Such relations have been proven to enhance commitment, innovation, and resilience, even when formal protections are limited.

Thus, the findings show that labor protection in women led MSMEs has a dual face. On the one hand, flexibility and family-like relations provide psychological security that fosters loyalty. On the other hand, the absence of formal protection still leaves workers vulnerable in the long term. The best strategy is to combine both maintaining flexibility and a family-like atmosphere, while gradually introducing simple forms of protection, such as light agreement-based contracts or access to micro social security schemes. With this approach, MSMEs can preserve their family character while also strengthening protection for workers.

5. Digital Transformation: Broader Opportunities for Inclusion

The interviews revealed that this women-led MSME had already begun adopting a hybrid sales model, combining offline sales in a physical store with online sales through live streaming on Facebook every afternoon and evening, as well as occasionally using TikTok. This strategy expanded their market reach beyond the local neighborhood to

consumers in other regions. The MSME owner explained how digitalization became a solution after the decline in sales during the post-pandemic period:

"Before trying to sell on Facebook, our buyers were only from the surrounding area. But since going live on Facebook, orders have come from Makassar and even Kalimantan. So now sales are busier." (MSME Owner, interview, 2025).

One worker also described how digitalization created new job opportunities:

"When we go live on Facebook, I help prepare the products, respond to buyers' chats, and send out packages. So my work has increased, but I also get extra pay." (Worker, interview, 2025).

This illustrates that digitalization functions not only as a marketing strategy but also as a source of new job creation in the local community. In addition to Facebook, the MSME also experimented with TikTok, although not consistently. A young worker involved in live streaming remarked:

"On TikTok, it's more fun because many young people are watching. But we don't use it often yet. If we were more consistent, I'm sure the results would be greater." (Worker, interview, 2025).

The presence of social media as a digital marketing channel enhanced direct interaction with consumers, building a sense of closeness and trust. Customers could see the products in detail, ask questions, and even bargain in real time. According to the owner, this created a more personal relationship compared to selling only on marketplaces:

"When we go live, people can see the clothes directly, ask questions, and I can answer them right away. It feels more trustworthy than just looking at photos on Shopee." (MSME Owner, interview, 2025).

These findings are consistent with (Alfika et al., 2025) who found that Facebook-based digital training helped MSMEs increase visibility and sales. Similarly, (Aqham et al., 2024) emphasized that social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp are effective not only in raising brand awareness but also in building long-term customer relationships. For workers, digital technologies also offered new avenues for empowerment. A young worker shared how she acquired new skills in online sales management:

"I've learned how to quickly reply to buyers' messages, take product photos, and pack items for shipping outside the city. Before, I knew nothing about online sales, but now I'm used to it." (Worker, interview, 2025).

This experience demonstrates that digital transformation supports not only the economic aspects of MSMEs but also strengthens social inclusion, as it provides local workers with opportunities to develop new skills relevant to the digital era. Furthermore, digitalization allowed this MSME to combine traditional trust-based values with modern technology-driven opportunities. Workers were still recruited

through social networks (informal recruitment), but their roles expanded due to the demands of digitalization. This shows that social inclusion can move in tandem with digital transformation. However, challenges remained. The owner acknowledged that limited digital literacy was a major obstacle:

"I've already understood Facebook quite well, but when it comes to TikTok or Instagram, I'm still confused. Sometimes I ask the younger workers for help. So I really need to learn more." (MSME Owner, interview, 2025).

Sari & Putri noted that while digital marketing provides significant opportunities for MSMEs, success depends heavily on consistent use of platforms and creative content (Sari & Putri, 2024). In the context of this women-led MSME, this remains a challenge that needs strengthening in the future. Thus, the experience of this MSME demonstrates that digital transformation can expand markets while simultaneously broadening avenues for social empowerment. Social media-based digitalization not only increases economic gains but also fosters broader social inclusion by creating new job opportunities, enhancing workers' digital skills, and strengthening the role of women-led MSMEs in navigating market competition.

Based on field findings and theoretical analysis, this study develops a conceptual model that illustrates the relationship between informal recruitment practices, social inclusion, social capital, digital transformation, and the resilience of women-led MSMEs. The model is presented in Figure 1 below.

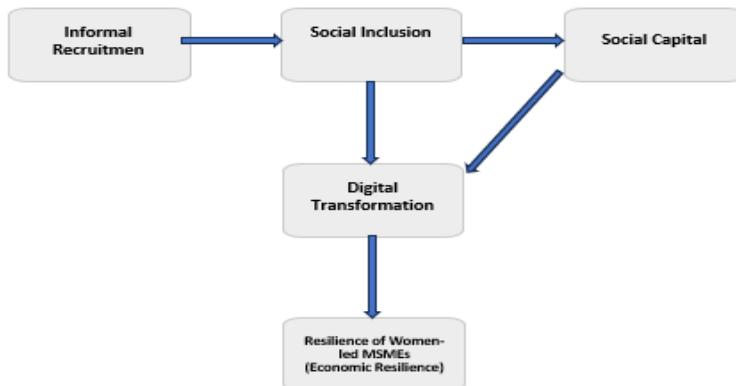


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the relationship between informal recruitment, social inclusion, social capital, and digital transformation in building the resilience of women-led MSMEs in South Sulawesi

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that informal recruitment in women-led MSMEs in South Sulawesi operates not only as an adaptive efficiency strategy but also as a mechanism of social inclusion. It enables marginalized groups—such as young women, housewives, and low-skilled workers—to access employment and participate in the local economy. At the same time, digital transformation through social media platforms has expanded market reach and created new roles for workers, showing that social networks and technology can complement each other in building resilience. The findings reaffirm the relevance of Social Capital Theory, particularly the dynamics of bonding and bridging capital, in explaining how trust-based recruitment both sustains solidarity and constrains diversity. This duality underscores the importance of balancing family-like relations with external linkages to foster innovation and long-term growth.

1. Practical Implications

For women entrepreneurs, the study points to the need for more structured and competency-oriented management of informal recruitment. For local governments and supporting institutions, inclusive recruitment should be integrated into capacity-building and digital marketing programs. For communities, informal recruitment can be used as an empowerment tool to strengthen the economic participation of vulnerable groups.

2. Academic Implications

This research contributes to the literature on human resource management in the informal sector by bridging the concepts of recruitment, social capital, and digitalization with a gender-sensitive perspective. It offers an alternative framework for understanding HR practices in contexts often overlooked by mainstream management studies.

3. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should extend beyond single-case exploration by comparing different regions or employing quantitative methods to measure the contribution of informal recruitment to income and inclusion. Further research on the interplay between digitalization, recruitment strategies, and women's empowerment could deepen theoretical insights and provide stronger policy recommendations.

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