

RESEARCH ARTICLE | THEMATIC EDITION

Entrusting Children to Grandmothers: Exploring Care Dynamics Through Multiple Roles of Women in Eastern Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the practice of entrusting children to relatives in Alor Tengah Utara, Alor Regency. It highlights the socio-economic factors compelling parents to work away from home. Often, this leads to parents leaving their children in the care of their grandparents. Despite the stagnant economic growth in Alor regency, many young individuals migrate in search of better opportunities, creating a dynamic where women, particularly grandmothers, become “double mothers” by caring for both their own and entrusted children. Conducted from June 2021 to July 2022, this ethnographic study reveals the challenges and economic vulnerabilities these households face, exacerbated by the inadequate intergenerational care provided by ageing grandmothers or inexperienced young female relatives. The findings highlight the need for more equitable caregiving arrangements and support for these families, shedding light on a practice deeply rooted in being a cultural responsibility yet fraught with economic and emotional complexities.

Keywords: *childcare dynamics; intergenerational care; kinship caregiving; economic migration; cultural responsibility*

INTRODUCTION

For over 70 years, entrusting children to relatives, particularly grandmothers, has been a common practice in eastern Indonesia (Du Bois, 1944; Rizky et al., 2017). This caring arrangement reflects not just the important roles of women in rural communities, but also more general social dynamics and economic requirements (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004; White, 2012). Close family ties frequently extend to distant relatives, close neighbours, or friends, with family members maintaining strong connections (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004). There is a general expectation for individuals to contribute to the family’s material and emotional well-being (Seymour, 2013).

Between 2019 and 2020, the economy of Alor slowed down due to corporate services (17%),



other services (11%), and food and beverage accommodations (9%). Although imports and family consumption accounted for 76% and 73% of total expenditures, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries remained vital by being 32% of the regency budget. The region's Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) increased by 2.5% in 2021, with construction up 11% and water supply, waste management, and mining up 6.5% and 6.08%, respectively. Agriculture inched up by 0.16% compared to the previous year. Domestic consumption remained the highest expense at 73%, followed by imports at 72% (District Agency of Statistic, 2021).

The economic structure, resources, and shifting trends in Alor Regency highlight a concerning pattern. According to recent annual reports, sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries grew by only 0.43% from the previous year. This is significantly lower than in other regencies in NTT, namely Kupang (22.6%), Sumba Timur (5.8%) and Ende (5.7%) in the same year (District Agency of Statistic, 2021). Due to this slow growth, many productive young people migrate to other regions including Bali, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Malaysia in search of better job opportunities and a more promising future (Lumbanrau, 2023; Seymour, 2013). Although the exact number of migrants from Alor is underreported, the demographic impact is evident at the household level (Provincial Agency of Statistics, 2023).

The practice of entrusting children relies heavily on older individuals, especially women, within the Abui community. Elders who are culturally positioned to ensure proper caregiving, are expected to contribute regardless of their family status (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004). Parents seeking employment elsewhere without taking their children due to financial constraints intensify the economic impact on caregivers. The children require daily nutritious food, school supplies, and other necessities, and often lack support from their parents. Eeuwijk (2019) stated that caregiving often occurs without estimation or preparation. Intensive attention is required and caregiving in ATU involves not only older parents but also younger family members and nearby relatives. These individuals refer as co-caregivers, who share the caregiving responsibilities (Eeuwijk, 2020).

The reasons behind parents entrusting their children to grandparents can vary greatly depending on the circumstances with a consideration of the children's care safety net (Ruiz-Casares & Heymann, 2009). Although publications in this area are scarce, historical examples suggest that factors such as the need for parental work, insufficient family income, or concerns about the family environment have influenced such decisions (Andrina & Kusumandari, 2022; Listiana, 2020; Lumbanrau, 2023). In East Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara Province, there are areas where almost all young mothers go to work abroad, and children are accompanied by their grandparents or other relatives (Beazley et al., 2018; Henschke, 2019).

This article addresses several gaps and challenges in the practice of entrusting children to relatives, particularly grandmothers, in eastern Indonesia. Despite the longstanding tradition of kinship caregiving, the contemporary socio-economic dynamics and migration patterns have introduced complexities that are less documented or understood.

METHOD

Data for this article was extracted from the main ethnographic study conducted from June 2021 to July 2022 in Alor Tengah Utara (ATU) sub-district, on Alor Island, Nusa Tenggara Timur Province. The study aims to evaluate the impacts of distance and severity of illness towards healthcare

seeking behaviour for acute febrile illnesses in eastern Indonesia. This study used purposive sampling to select informants (Campbell et al., 2020). We interviewed the representative of households, aged ≥ 18 years old and observed family members below 18. The interviews were conducted by the authors in Abui or Alor Malay language.

Following the informed consent, informants were asked about their demographic, socio-economic, general health problems, acute fever experiences among household members in the past 30 days, and how the caretakers managed those fever events. We became interested in some facts that among those who experienced fever, there were some of early aged children who were unregistered in their official family card (*kartu keluarga*) and were raised by their extended family while the parents were away. The primary research involved conducting several interviews, making observations, and informally interacting with key informants. Interviews and participant observations were carried out to understand the childcare dynamics, starting with verbal consent from participants. The researchers interacted with informants discreetly, joining in daily activities without disrupting natural interactions. Moreover, care was taken to ensure that all questions were respectful and thoughtful. The questions included topics surrounding initial decisions, daily routines, emotional aspects of the caretakers, challenges and support systems, relationship dynamics within the household, cultural, and educational values.

Data and information for this paper were collected exclusively from households that were raising children of relatives. The data was then analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings in textual or visual data. Thematic analysis involves a systematic process of data familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up analyses to underlying concepts and complex insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Study Site

Alor Tengah Utara (ATU) is a sub-district within the administrative borders of Alor regency, comprising 14 villages. The topography of ATU includes both mountain and coastal areas. The connectivity between these villages highly depends on the quality of the road networks. While coastal areas have relatively good road conditions, the roads in the mountainous areas are often poor in conditions. Some villagers must travel two to three hours to reach Kalabahi, the administrative capital of Alor regency. The rainy season is relatively short compared to the dry season, so crops in ATU rely heavily on raid-fed land, cultivated mainly between September to December.

The population of ATU consists mainly of Abui people, who coexist with people from nearby islands such as Pantar, Pura, Buaya, and from other locations like Flores, Kupang, and Rote. The area is now more ethnically diverse than when the ethnographic study was done by Cora Du Bois in 1937–1939 (Du Bois, 1944). Culturally, the area is deeply connected to the heritage of the Abui ethnic group, the indigenous population of the central and mountainous lands of Alor Island (Holton, 2014; Holton et al., 2017; Holton et al., 2012; Wellfelt, 2016). This heritage is evident in medical practices, tribal traditions, familial privileges, and prevalent linguistic patterns across ATU¹. The three major religions in the area are Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam (District Agency of Statistics, 2022).

Most individuals in the ATU sub-district are involved in agriculture and fishing, while a

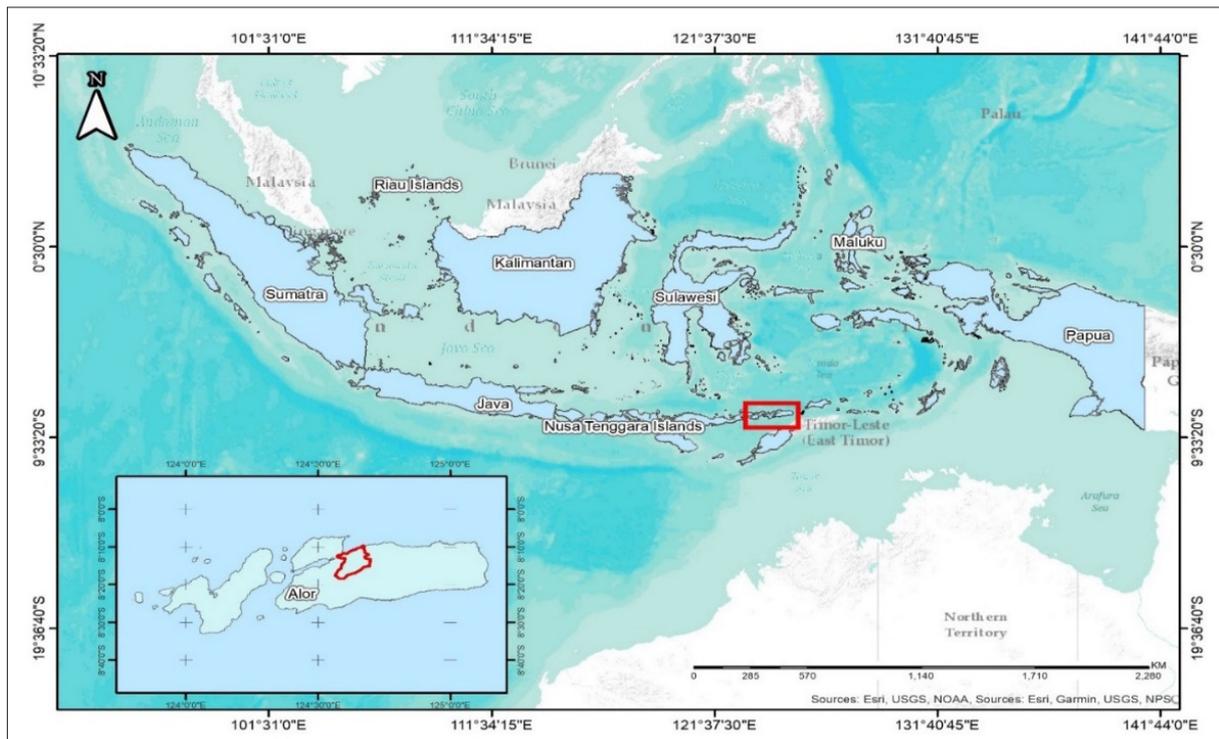


Figure 1. Study site on Alor Island in southeastern Indonesia (red rectangle) and Alor Tengah Utara sub-district consisting of 14 villages (red polygon)

minority work in governmental, private financial, and commerce sectors. Beside their primary jobs, they regularly engage in agricultural activities and collect hardwood commodities, like candlenut, tamarind, and cashew. Although trading in small kiosks in residents' yards or on the roadside is less documented, it is widespread. Some people in ATU have multiple income sources, such as working on farms or in markets during the day and fishing or hunting at night (District Agency of Statistics, 2021, 2022). However, young people often seek stable employment and opportunities outside the island.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from OxTREC² and a local Ethics Committee³. Verbal consent was obtained for all interviews and observations related to childcare dynamics. Before participation, we explained the study's purpose, methods, and confidentiality measures. Informants were assured that their involvement was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. We treated personal identity as strictly confidential data and protected informants' privacy using pseudonyms. We ensured cultural sensitivity by respecting norms, languages, and traditions by asking appropriate questions. We prioritized minimizing harm and offered support if sensitive topics caused distress, especially regarding childcare and family dynamics. When involving children, we took extra care to protect their welfare and obtained parental or guardian consent.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Informants and Their Children

The informants in this study were Christian females from the Abui community, aged between 43 and 63 years, with an average age of 54 years. They were responsible for raising the young children of their relatives who live outside of Alor. The three main informants consisted of two poor households and one well-off household. All three women shared the same responsibility of caring for and raising their grandchildren as integral members of their households. All the informants were engaged in agricultural activities, two were married women, and one was a widow. These households exclusively relied on the agricultural production from their land for income. The number of households caring for such children was unclearly documented at the village or sub-district level, and the addition of household members was rarely reported administratively. Children were often registered only when enrolling in school.

General Roles of Abui Women

This research was conducted in the Abui community living in the ATU sub-district. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, the researchers identified the essential roles of Abui women, which extended beyond their households, to community, and customary events. These roles exceeded those of men, and were embedded from a young age.

According to our observations, Abui women play crucial roles in domestic, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of the community. Domestically, they are primarily responsible for managing their households. As wives and mothers, Abui women are expected to bear children, care for them, ensure their needs and happiness, and provide food for the entire family. If they are unable to do so, they would be perceived as failures in meeting the familial and societal expectations imposed by the male family members. Additionally, they have to demonstrate communal characteristics, such as affection, helpfulness, kindness, sympathy, nurturing, softness, and interpersonal sensitivity.

The economic role of women in the Abui community is crucial, particularly in low-income households or those lacking a stable source of income. Women support the household leader in the cultivation and processing of agricultural produce, making their involvement vital for the financial stability of the household. Some observations even suggested that having multiple wives is beneficial for managing large agricultural lands.

Furthermore, Abui women play a vital socio-cultural role in their community. They hold fundamental roles in cultural practices such as weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies, and inheritance rituals. The role of being a “*moko* bearer”⁴ is ascribed to Abui women from birth. After marriage, a woman will hold significant responsibilities towards both her spouse’s family and her paternal family as a member of the clan. These roles highlighted the essential contributions of Abui women to their households and community, demonstrating their pivotal position in sustaining cultural and economic practices.

Supporting Factors for Raising Entrusted Children

Two major factors that contribute to the care of entrusted children are social environment and financial support. These factors are crucial not only within the family but also in the broader social context, including communication with the biological parents and financial assistance.

In the Abui community, child-rearing is a communal responsibility, not solely for the biological parents. Caregiving is often imposed to women in the household, and it is common for multiple households to share this responsibility. According to Cora Du Bois' ethnography (Du Bois, 1944), while Abui families were centred on the nuclear family, they were significantly influenced by relatives. In our study, we observed that a social structure known as "one house" was used by multiple households, with women playing a key role in childcare. Shared caregiving helped in raising the next generation and reduced the burden on women individually.

However, challenges arose when there were no other women to share the caregiving duties, or when the child's parents were far away. The shared responsibility seemed manageable, but the absence of additional caregivers led to significant difficulties.

Financial assistance is critical for families caring for entrusted children, especially those with several children. Economic hardships will make childcare challenging, and these families often rely on remittances from the children's parents. The care of entrusted children becomes an additional financial burden, particularly when the children have reached school age. Thus, families must allocate part of their income to cover educational and other expenses for these children.

The financial situation of the family significantly impacted how well these children were cared for. Childcare involves extensive family and complex kinship networks (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004). According to Keesing (1975), a person's kinship network plays an important role in their life and social attachment to the community (Keesing, 1975). Women in custodial families often take on the primary caregiver role, and in some cases, the caregiver is the elder in the family (Chamberlain, 1997; Coe, 2013; Herrera, 2010). Decision-making about the cost of care, motherhood practices, and the timing of reunification with biological parents were unclearly discussed which leads to difficulties and uncertainty for all parties involved.

Care Dynamics and Cultural Responsibility

Elderly caregivers are often unable to enjoy their retirement years as they continue to work long hours caring for their grandchildren. As a result, they would frequently assign the childcare responsibilities to younger women in the household, such as daughters or daughters-in-law, who have less experience and a weaker bargaining position. This then leads to inadequate care in supporting the children's development. For example, older Abui women working on distant farms left childcare to their daughters-in-law or eldest unmarried daughters. Sometimes even young girls in elementary school would be responsible for their young nieces and nephews.

Despite these challenges, many families willingly took on the care of entrusted children from extended family members as a form of cultural responsibility and Abui women viewed this care as a cultural duty. Although Baldassar et al. (Baldassar et al., 2007) suggested, after assessing the capacities and opportunities of potential caregivers based on their economic ability was often not feasible to be done in the Abui community.

The following section presents the findings from the study on the caregiving dynamics within the Abui community, focusing on three case studies. These cases illustrate the diverse challenges and strategies involved in raising entrusted children. Each case provides insight into the social economic and cultural factors that influence caregiving practices.

Case Study 1: Mama Rana's family

At the end of 2021, Helmut and Diana's parents migrated from Alor Island to Denpasar, Bali to work in the tourism sector. They left their two children in the care of their grandmother, Mama Rana (55), due to financial and family difficulties. In addition to Helmut and Diana, Mama Rana also takes care for her youngest daughter, Fani (15), and another granddaughter, Vita (15), the daughter of her eldest daughter.

Mama Rana's family relies solely on farming crops to support nine individuals in the household. Given the current constraints, the entrusted children receive a modest food intake shared among family members. Mama Rana and her husband work every day in the farms, located far away from their house. Her husband often stays in the mountains for days to manage their land on the hilly areas as he has to protect the crops from wild animals such as wild boars, deer, and partridges by setting traps around the farms. If any of the wild animals were caught, their meat would be brought home to feed the family. Mama Rana mostly stays home to process agricultural products with assistance from the young females in the household. Pilling, cleaning, and drying the agricultural products are done to increase their selling price in the market. Otherwise, raw agricultural products would only be valued at a low price.

While Mama Rana fulfils her responsibilities as a homemaker and farmer, Helmut and Diana would receive care from various family members including their cousin Vita, aunt Fani, and aunt-in-law Danita, in a rotating manner. They are given basic food and drink without additional nutrition or supplementary foods which fall far short for the level of care required for pre-school children.

"Let me take care of these two children as if they are my own. Their parents never send any money. So, I must work and provide food for them. Their aunts help when I am away" – Mama Rana, F/55.

Their interaction with their parents is mostly done through voice calls and occasional video calls depending on the internet access they have. Neither parents nor caregivers clearly discussed the cost of childcare and the time of family reunification, leading to difficulties and uncertainty for all parties involved. It is rather a statement like *"I entrust my child to your care"*.

Mama Rana's decision to accept guardianship of Helmut and Diana was rooted in the longstanding tradition of the Abui family, where she felt a cultural obligation to care for her grandchildren.

Case Study 2: Mama Ruby's Family

At the end of 2020, Bunga was born on a ship traveling from Kupang, the capital city of Nusa Tenggara Timur Province to Alor Island. Since then, Bunga has been entrusted to her grandmother, Mama Rubi (43), to be raised as her own child while her parents pursue their education. Mama Rubi also has to take care of her youngest daughter, Rara (12) who only has a slight age difference with Bunga, often leading to their relationship being misinterpreted as siblings.

In this case, Mama Rubi serves as a kinship carer for Bunga, representing her biological parents. She ensures that Bunga's basic needs of nutritious food and beverages were met, and fulfil her health requirements, such as going to the nearest integrated health post⁵ to receive compulsory vaccinations.

“Bunga’s parents are in school in Kupang and certainly unable to take care of her properly. So, it is better for Bunga to be here with me” – Mama Ruby, F/43.

Compared to other informants, Mama Rubi’s household reflected a higher socio-economic status. Her husband manages agricultural activities on large lands on the hills, and occasional carpentry tasks such as constructing doors and frames. Since the end of 2020, Mama Rubi has taken sole responsibility for Bunga’s needs, without any financial support from Bunga’s parents. Communication with Bunga’s parents is maintained through regular phone and video calls, although Bunga faces challenges in recognizing her parents during these calls.

Mama Rubi receives assistance from Rara in caring for Bunga, which helps alleviate her workload. However, Rara often takes a more assertive role in educating and disciplining Bunga. She frequently scolds Bunga if she misbehaves or cries, and often carries and accompanies Bunga when returning from school. Despite these challenges, Mama Rubi is confident in her ability to provide affection and meet Bunga’s future needs with her own strength and resources.

Case Study 3: Grandma Tifa’s Family

Grandma Tifa (63) has been a widow since 2019. Her children are settled in various locations including Malaysia, and different cities in Indonesia. Maria (31), one of her daughters recently returned home after her husband’s death and assists in caring for four grandchildren entrusted to Grandma Tifa’s care. The household consisted of six members living in two rooms with a bamboo-walled kitchen and an earth floor.

There are four children residing in Grandma Tifa’s home, ranging from six to 13 years old. One of her grandsons (13) who is in junior high school, frequently moves between families, but always considered Grandma Tifa’s house his home.

Grandma Tifa’s home lacks electricity and running water. Despite her frequent requests to village authorities for electricity, the house remains dark at night. To meet their water needs, the family would carry at least two buckets of water twice a day from their neighbour’s well at the bottom of the hill. Grandma Tifa only makes the trip every two days to conserve energy, relying on family members, including the grandchildren, to help with this task when they are available.

The household relies on a small agricultural plot for income, growing maize, sweet potatoes, and cassava. Additionally, Grandma Tifa sometimes receives small payments for her services as a masseur and traditional midwife. She is known in the village as a traditional healer for providing massage services to pregnant women and newborn babies and assisting with labour. She never asks for payment, but sometimes receives woven cloth, food, or small amounts of money as expressions of gratitude.

Grandma Tifa also expects some financial support from her children who worked outside the area. She typically receives remittances of about IDR 600,000 (USD 40) every few months, which she uses to buy food and household necessities. Additionally, the family receives financial assistance from the village government in the form of a cash transfer (*Bantuan Langsung Tunai* or BLT) of IDR 300,000 (USD 20) biannually.

“I take care of six grandchildren. Four live with me at home, and two stay at my relative’s house. My children who live far away do send money for rice, but it is not much. When we have money, we shop. When we don’t, we sit by the road and wait for someone to come and

give us money” – Grandma Tifa, F/63.

Grandma Tifa faces physical and economic limitations in her caregiving role. She frequently experiences body discomfort and joint pain, which would hinder her ability to care for her grandchildren compared to when she cared for her own children. Despite these challenges, Grandma Tifa took the responsibility of caregiving as a fundamental duty as an Abui woman.

Discussion

This article aims to evaluate the dynamics and challenges associated with entrusting children to their grandparents in eastern Indonesia. The results from ethnographic study conducted in Alor Tengah Utara (ATU) sub-district revealed significant socio-economic and cultural factors influencing this practice.

Economic pressures and the migration of young parents for better life opportunities were, as anticipated, the primary reasons for parents to entrust their children to their grandmothers. The economic stagnation in Alor regency, with minimal growth in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries forced many parents to seek employment elsewhere, leaving their children in the care of elderly relatives. This is aligned with previous studies highlighting economic migration as a key factor in kinship caregiving arrangements in Indonesia (Rizky et al., 2017; Seymour, 2013).

Consistent with the existing literature in Indonesia (Andrina & Kusumandari, 2022; Fauziniatyas et al., 2018; Somaiah & Yeoh, 2023), this study confirms that women, particularly grandmothers or elder women in the family, play a central role in caregiving. The position as the eldest woman in the household made them take the full role of a guardian for the children. When grandmothers are unable to manage care alone, younger women in the family automatically will become co-caregivers (Eeuwijk, 2020). This cultural expectation for women to be primary caregivers is deeply rooted, reflecting the communal and familial obligations prevalent among the Abui community.

While it was expected that grandmothers would face challenges in caregiving due to their age, the extent of physical and economic limitations were profound (Schröder-Butterfill, 2004). Many grandmothers reported significant physical discomfort and joint pain, which hindered their ability to provide adequate care. This issue was worsened by economic hardships, as the additional burden of caring for grandchildren strains their limited resources. The reliance on remittances and the irregularity of such support further aggravates these challenges.

A previous study revealed that the inadequate care provided by physically ageing grandmothers and inexperienced younger female relatives significantly impacted the children’s development (Andrina & Kusumandari, 2022). Children in these households often receive basic food and drink without additional nutrition or supplementary foods, leading to potential health and developmental issues (Rizky et al., 2017). Lacking consistency of adequate care, health, and hygiene pose serious risks to children’s well-being.

Another finding from the study was that communication between children and their biological parents was limited and frequently ineffective. Most interactions were through occasional phone or video calls, which were insufficient to maintain strong emotional bonds or address the children’s needs effectively. This lack of regular and meaningful communication intensifies the emotional and psychological challenges faced by the children and caregivers.

However, children in many communities demonstrated maternal bonds to any female relatives when their mothers were engaged in agricultural activities (Du Bois, 1944). A study from the Czech Republic revealed that communication between grandchildren and grandparents involved activities like chatting, housework, and watching television discussing achievements, hobbies, and family matters (Stasova & Krisikova, 2014).

The cultural obligation for Abui women to care for their relatives' children often leads to acceptance of these roles without proper assessment of their capabilities or resources. This resulted in caregivers being overwhelmed and under-supported, affecting the quality of care provided. The study suggests that more equitable caregiving arrangements and better support systems are essential to address these issues.

The economic vulnerabilities of these families, compounded by the additional financial burden of caring for entrusted children are two critical factors (Fauzinigtyas et al., 2018; Schröder-Butterfill, 2004, 2005). The irregularity and insufficiency of financial support from migrant parents left caregivers struggling to meet the children's basic needs. This economic strain was a significant barrier to providing adequate care and ensuring the children's well-being.

The generational differences between elderly grandmothers and younger female relatives in terms of caregiving approaches and experience also contributed to the challenges (Antawati, 2019; Stasova & Krisikova, 2014). Younger caregivers often lack experience and authority to provide consistent and effective care, leading to inadequate support for the children's developmental needs.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the challenges of kinship caregiving in eastern Indonesia, particularly the role of grandmothers. The findings highlight the need for a system that ensures adequate care for the entrusted children. Cultural, economic, and social factors need to be considered to enhance the well-being of caregivers and the children. By understanding these issues, migrant parents, community leaders, and policymakers can devise strategies to support kinship care and ensure better outcomes for children in care.

ENDNOTES

- 1) Although this does not rule out the potential of it occurring in the adjoining ATU sub-districts. According to narratives from key informants, their ancestors lived in most of central Alor from the southern shore to Mataru sub-district located in south-western part of Alor Island.
- 2) Oxford Tropical Research Ethics Committee, University of Oxford, U.K.
- 3) National Health Institute and Research Development, the Ministry of Health, Republic of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- 4) Moko, a type of bronze drum, is given as a dowry (*belis*) in customary marriage. The groom's family presents Moko to the bride's family, who determines the type and quantity of Moko requested. This practice has important cultural meanings, it represents the sacredness of marriage, reinforcing social status, preserving cultural identity, and assisting in the conservation of these historical artefacts.
- 5) Integrated health post or *pos pelayanan terpadu* (Posyandu).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are sincerely grateful for DISTANTT's qualitative study team, namely Oliva Bhili, and Musa Padama. We thank all participants and village leaders who voluntarily participated and demonstrated continuous support during the study commencement.

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