

Educational and Social Capital Strategies of Rural Women Leaders: Religiosity and Social Inclusion for Gender-Equitable Communication

Berthin Simega¹, Johana Ruadjanna Tangirerung^{2*}, Apriana Toding³

^{1,2} Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

³ Universitas Kristen Indonesia Paulus, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

ORCIDs/Email:

First AUTHOR : <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2884-278X> / johana.tangirerung@ukitoraja.ac.id

Second AUTHOR : <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8773-2658> / berthin.simega@ukitoraja.ac.id

Third AUTHOR : <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8668-1729> / apriana.toding@ukipaulus.ac.id

Corresponding author email: johana.tangirerung@ukitoraja.ac.id

Article Info

Received: 11/11/2025

Revised: 20/02/2026

Accepted: 25/04/2026

Online: 30/06/2026

Abstract

This study examines the influence of educational and social capital on gender-equitable communication among women leaders in rural communities, positioning religiosity as a reinforcing variable and social inclusion as a mediating mechanism linking social capital to communicative outcomes. An explanatory quantitative approach employing a cross-sectional survey design was adopted to test the hypothesized relationships among latent constructs. The study sample comprised sixty community women leaders, including female pastors, chairpersons of the Toraja Church Women's Fellowship, Family Welfare Movement officials, and other female religious figures drawn from two regencies, Tana Toraja and North Toraja, selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered via a structured questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. Evaluation of the measurement model demonstrated satisfactory convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability across all constructs. The structural model results reveal that educational capital and social capital exert a positive and significant influence on gender-equitable communication, while religiosity, situated within the context of Toraja Church service, likewise contributes positively, albeit with a comparatively modest effect. Social inclusion is shown to partially mediate the relationship between social capital and gender-equitable communication, indicating both direct and indirect pathways of influence. The tested model accounts for an adequate proportion of variance in social inclusion and gender-equitable communication. These findings substantiate that strengthening educational capacity, expanding inclusive social networks, and reinterpreting religious values in support of equality constitute complementary strategies for advancing equitable communication within Torajan communities, informing contextually grounded empowerment policy for rural women leaders..

Keywords: educational capital; social capital; religiosity; social inclusion; gender-equitable communication; Torajan women leaders



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INTRODUCTION

Women in rural areas occupy a strategic position in driving community development, whether through participation in village deliberative forums, the management of enterprise groups, or the strengthening of inter-community social networks. Nevertheless, their engagement in public decision-making processes continues to encounter structural impediments, including patriarchal cultural norms, restricted access to education, and the paucity of equitable communicative space between men and women (Tangirerung et al., 2020; Purwanti et al., 2019; Nalle et al., 2024). Research on women's participation in Indonesian village governance demonstrates that educational disparities and constrained access to resources continue to limit women's full engagement in village deliberative bodies, notwithstanding their demonstrably significant contribution to community human-resource development.

Educational capital and social capital constitute two principal resources enabling women to broaden their public participation. Education whether formal or non-formal has been established as a critical precondition for women's empowerment, insofar as it cultivates self-confidence, advocacy skills, and awareness of one's rights (Alkire et al., 2013). Correspondingly, social capital comprising the bonding (intra-group ties), bridging (inter-group connections), and linking (relations with formal authority) dimensions enables women to mobilize broader support, information, and resources (Chen & Meng, 2015; Seferiadis et al., 2018). Research on rural women in China indicates that social capital serves as a critical mediating pathway linking women's empowerment to reductions in household poverty (Tangirerung et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025), while studies in Bangladesh demonstrate that the strengthening of productive social capital can transform gender relations within both household and community spheres (Seferiadis et al., 2018). Similarly, research on left-behind women in rural China reveals that social participation and social capital jointly reinforce the resilience and sustainability of women's empowerment (Cheng et al., 2025).

Beyond educational and social capital, religiosity has likewise been shown to occupy an ambivalent yet consequential role in the lives of rural women. On one hand, particular religious norms may perpetuate inequitable gender divisions of labor; on the other, women's active engagement in religious institutions and networks can constitute a source of social authority, emotional support, and leadership legitimacy (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012). Within the context of Protestant churches in Indonesia, theological scholarship on women in religious leadership indicates that the leadership experiences of Christian women including those serving as ordained ministers remain frequently overshadowed by patriarchal ecclesiastical structures, notwithstanding that women have theologically and practically demonstrated their capacity to discharge pastoral leadership functions effectively (Natar, 2019). Research specifically addressing the leadership of female pastors within the Toraja Church affirms that the effectiveness of their leadership is substantially contingent upon their level of commitment, consistency, and humility in ministering to the congregation, which in turn engenders trust and social legitimacy within the community (Randan, 2022). Cross-national research in Africa further demonstrates that religion can contribute positively to women's empowerment when religious values are reinterpreted inclusively and in support of equality (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012). Additional research finds that community-level religiosity is associated with the strengthening of social capital and women's health, suggesting that religious institutions including women's ecclesiastical fellowships such as the Toraja Church Women's Fellowship (PWGT) may function as productive nodes within social networks (Dauner & Wilmot, 2019; Tangirerung et al., 2020). In the context of family planning and gender equality in Uganda, community dialogues engaging religious and customary leaders have proven effective in transforming norms that impede gender equality into norms more supportive of joint decision-making between husbands and wives (Sileo et al., 2022, 2024).

Social inclusion understood as the extent to which women are equitably engaged within public spaces, decision-making forums, and community networks is posited as a linking variable between capital ownership (educational, social, religious) and the realization of gender-equitable communication. Research on women's engagement in civil society organizations in rural Indonesia indicates that empowerment-oriented organizations are capable of strengthening women's influence within processes of local power brokerage (Diprose, 2023). A study of women's political participation in Gowa Regency further confirms that non-formal education exerts a significant influence on villagers' engagement,

including that of women, in village political forums. Meanwhile, research on the Program for Enhancing the Role of Women toward Healthy and Prosperous Families (P2WKSS) in West Java affirms that effective gender communication strategies employing face-to-face persuasion, informal gatherings, and digital media such as WhatsApp have contributed to transforming women's roles from domestic caregivers into economic actors and decision-makers at the village level (Yulianti et al., 2025).

Gender-equitable communication is itself defined as a communicative pattern that affords women and men equal opportunity to voice their perspectives, engage in joint decision-making, and accord mutual respect within both public and domestic interactions. Research on gender-equitable attitudes among men in rural India demonstrates that such attitudes are associated with increased equitable family-planning communication between husbands and wives (Ghule et al., 2024). Comparable research in South Africa reveals that gender-transformative community mobilization can convert norms of violence into norms of equality through the strengthening of supportive social networks (Treves-Kagan et al., 2019). With respect to communication skills specifically, a quantitative study of 40 women leaders of farming communities in Puno, Peru, identified a positive and significant correlation between communication skills and women's empowerment ($r = 0.53$; $p < 0.05$), indicating that communicative capacity constitutes a critical precondition for women's political and economic participation (Flores-Mamani et al., 2024).

Digital transformation, moreover, is opening new pathways toward gender-equitable communication in rural areas. Research on rural women's digital literacy in India finds that enhanced digital literacy contributes to the expansion of women's empowerment, with education serving as a principal reinforcing factor (Kumar et al., 2026). Nevertheless, infrastructural disparities and cultural norms across many rural regions continue to constrain the optimal utilization of such digital capital, such that educational capital, conventional social capital, and religiosity remain the principal foundations of empowerment strategies for rural women leaders (Alhumaid et al., 2024; Sauter et al., 2023).

In light of the foregoing discussion, this study aims to: (1) examine the influence of educational capital on gender-equitable communication among rural women leaders; (2) examine the influence of social capital on gender-equitable communication; (3) examine the influence of religiosity on gender-equitable communication; and (4) test the mediating role of social inclusion in the relationship between social capital and gender-equitable communication. This study is expected to yield theoretical contributions toward the development of a social capital framework within the rural gender context (Wonde, 2024), as well as practical contributions toward the formulation of more contextually grounded and sustainable women's empowerment policy.

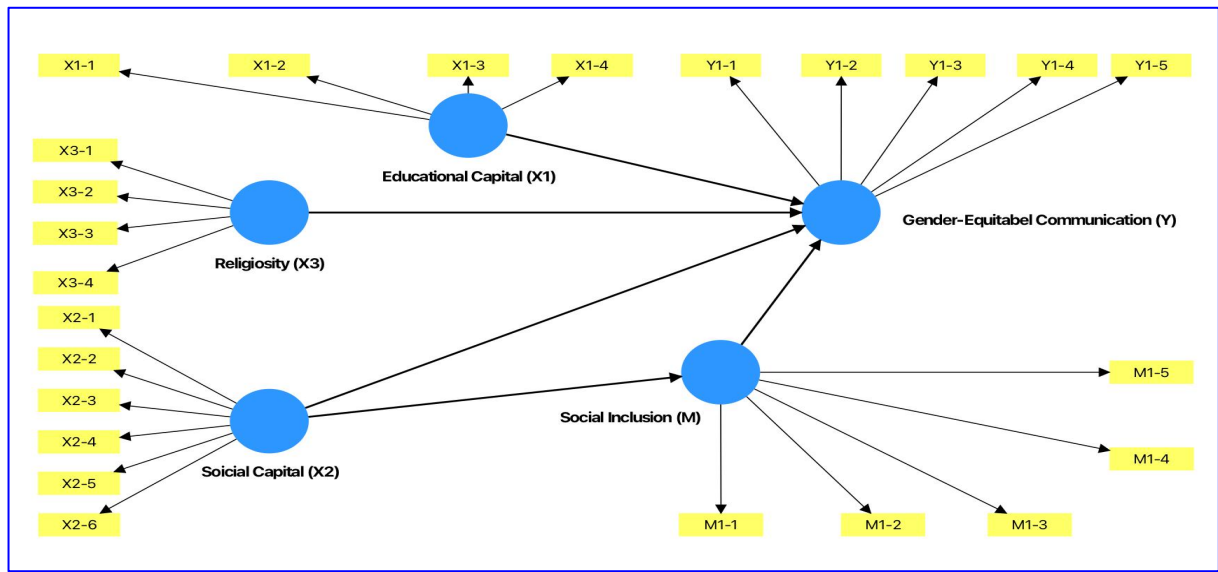


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach utilizing an explanatory research design and a cross-sectional survey strategy. This approach was selected because the research objective is to test causal relationships among latent variables that cannot be directly observed (educational capital, social capital, religiosity, social inclusion, and gender-equitable communication), thereby necessitating structural equation modeling techniques.

Population, Sample, and Research Location

The study population comprises women community leaders in rural Toraja, consisting of female pastors, chairpersons and officials of the Toraja Church Women's Fellowship (PWGT) at the congregational and classis levels, Family Welfare Movement (PKK) officials at the village level, and other female religious figures (e.g., female sintua or church elders). Sample selection employed a purposive sampling technique across two regencies constituting the customary and ecclesiastical service base of the Toraja Church namely Tana Toraja Regency and North Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi Province with due consideration given to the representation of both urban and rural congregations within each regency. The final sample meeting the inclusion criteria comprised 60 respondents. This sample size satisfies the minimum requirement for PLS-SEM analysis, namely ten times the maximum number of paths (arrows) directed toward any single construct within the model.

Operational Definitions and Instrumentation

This study involves five latent variables measured using a closed-ended questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

1. Educational Capital (X1): formal/theological educational attainment, participation in ministry-leadership training, and functional literacy (4 indicators).
2. Social Capital (X2): the bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions in accordance with Putnam's framework, encompassing trust among congregation members, cross-group ministry networks, and access to village government officials and church councils (6 indicators).
3. Religiosity (X3): frequency of participation in Toraja Church worship and ministry including Toraja Church Women's Fellowship (PWGT) activities and the interpretation of Christian faith values in support of equality (4 indicators).
4. Social Inclusion (M): engagement in congregational/village deliberative forums, access to public information, and recognition of women's leadership roles in both ministry and village governance (5 indicators).
5. Gender-Equitable Communication (Y): equality of opportunity to speak, joint decision-making, and respect accorded to women's perspectives within congregational, public, and domestic forums (5 indicators).

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the assistance of SmartPLS software. The analytical procedure encompassed evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) comprising tests of convergent validity via outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), as well as reliability tests via Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha and evaluation of the structural model (inner model), comprising tests of the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and path significance via a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. Mediation testing was conducted using the variance accounted for (VAF) approach to determine the type of mediation (full or partial).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the study's 60 respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	31–40 years	12	20.0
	41–50 years	25	41.7
	> 50 years	23	38.3
Educational Attainment	Junior High School or below	6	10.0
	Senior High School / Equivalent	21	35.0
	Diploma / Bachelor's Degree / Theological College	33	55.0
Leadership Role	Female Pastor (Reverend)	14	23.3
	Chairperson, Toraja Church Women's Fellowship (PWGT)	16	26.7
	PKK (Family Welfare Movement) Official	20	33.3
	Other Female Religious Figure	10	16.7
Region	Tana Toraja Regency	32	53.3
	North Toraja Regency	28	46.7

Source: Illustrative research data, 2025.

Measurement Model (Outer Model) Evaluation Results

The results of construct validity and reliability testing are presented in Table 2. All outer loading values exceed 0.70, all AVE values exceed 0.50, and all Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values exceed 0.70; accordingly, all constructs are deemed valid and reliable.

Construct	Outer Loading Range	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Educational Capital (X1)	0.74–0.86	0.63	0.87	0.81
Social Capital (X2)	0.71–0.85	0.61	0.89	0.85
Religiosity (X3)	0.76–0.88	0.66	0.88	0.82
Social Inclusion (M)	0.73–0.87	0.64	0.90	0.86
Gender-Equitable Communication (Y)	0.75–0.89	0.68	0.91	0.88

Source: Illustrative PLS-SEM data-processing results, 2025.

Structural Model (Inner Model) Evaluation Results and Hypothesis Testing

The R-square values indicate that the model accounts for 36% of the variance in Social Inclusion ($R^2 = 0.36$; $Q^2 = 0.26$) and 49% of the variance in Gender-Equitable Communication ($R^2 = 0.49$; $Q^2 = 0.31$),

indicating moderate-to-strong predictive power notwithstanding the comparatively limited sample size ($n = 60$). The results of hypothesis testing via the bootstrapping procedure are presented in Table 3.

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient (β)	t-statistic	p-value	Remarks
H1	Educational Capital $\rightarrow$ Gender-Equitable Communication	0.27	2.86	0.004	Supported
H2	Social Capital $\rightarrow$ Gender-Equitable Communication	0.33	3.24	0.001	Supported
H3	Religiosity $\rightarrow$ Gender-Equitable Communication	0.21	2.01	0.045	Supported
H4	Social Capital $\rightarrow$ Social Inclusion	0.40	3.78	0.000	Supported
H5	Social Inclusion $\rightarrow$ Gender-Equitable Communication	0.29	2.92	0.004	Supported
H6	Social Capital $\rightarrow$ Social Inclusion $\rightarrow$ Gender-Equitable Communication (mediation)	0.116	2.11	0.035	Partial mediation

Source: Illustrative PLS-SEM data-processing results (bootstrapping, 5,000 subsamples), 2025.

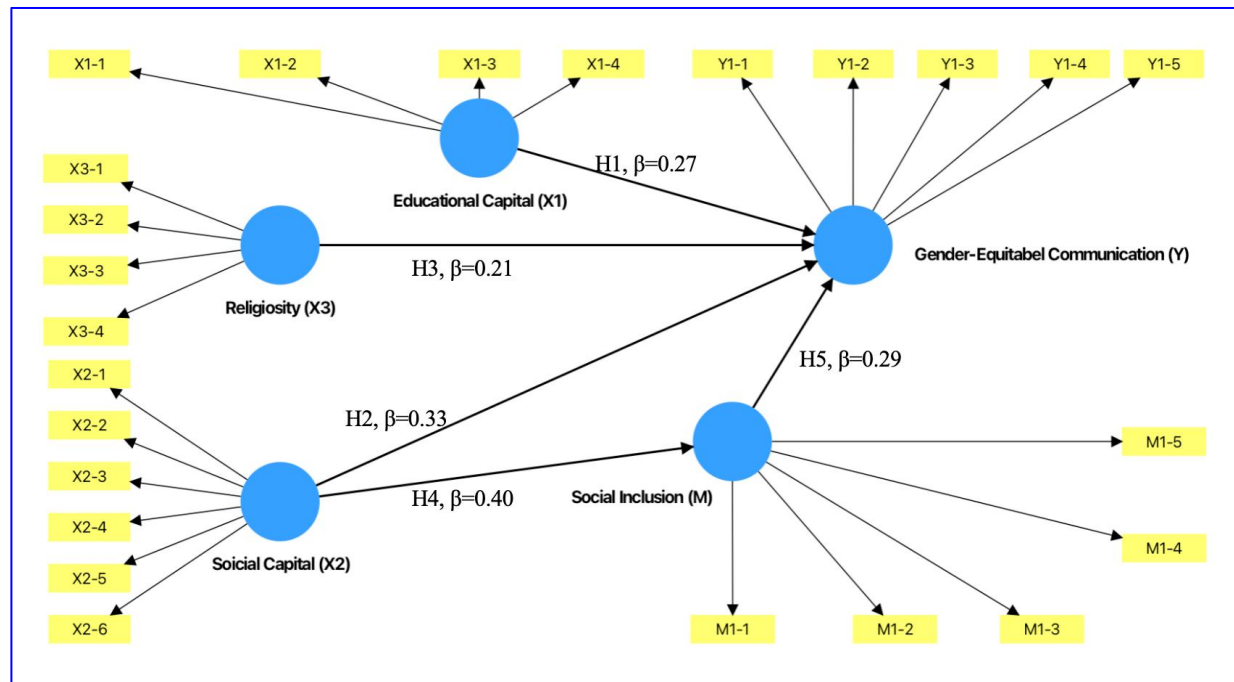


Figure 2. Path Diagram of Hypothesis-Testing Results

Discussion

The results of hypothesis testing for H1 indicate that educational capital exerts a positive and statistically significant influence on gender-equitable communication ($\beta = 0.27$; $p = 0.004$). This finding is consistent with the argument that education including theological education for female pastors cultivates cognitive capacity and self-confidence that enable women to speak on equal terms within both congregational and village public forums (Alkire et al., 2013). Leadership training and communication skills acquired through formal education and ecclesiastical service have been empirically demonstrated to enhance the empowerment of women community leaders, as evidenced in a

quantitative study of women leaders of farming communities in Peru that documented a significant correlation between communication skills and empowerment (Flores-Mamani et al., 2024).

The results of hypothesis testing for H2 indicate that social capital exerts the strongest influence on gender-equitable communication ($\beta = 0.33$; $p = 0.001$) relative to the other predictor variables. This finding reinforces the bonding-bridging-linking social capital framework, whereby cross-group ministry networks (bridging) for instance, among Toraja Church Women's Fellowship branches across different congregations and connections with formal village authorities and church councils (linking) enable women to mobilize broader support in voicing their interests (Chen & Meng, 2015; Seferiadis et al., 2018). This result is consistent with findings among rural women in Western China, which indicate that social capital constitutes the principal pathway for strengthening women's empowerment and improving household welfare (Wang et al., 2025), as well as among left-behind women who leverage social participation as a principal resource for community resilience (Cheng et al., 2025).

The results of hypothesis testing for H3 indicate that religiosity exerts a positive influence on gender-equitable communication, albeit with a comparatively smaller effect magnitude ($\beta = 0.21$; $p = 0.045$) relative to educational and social capital. This finding affirms the ambivalent character of religiosity documented in the literature on women's leadership within the church: ecclesiastical structures still colored by patriarchal culture may constrain the space available for women's voices (Natar, 2019); yet when faith values are interpreted inclusively and enacted through consistent ministry commitment, religiosity instead becomes a source of legitimacy and community trust in women's leadership, as demonstrated in research on female pastoral leadership within the Toraja Church (Randan, 2022) and in cross-national research on religion's contribution to women's empowerment (Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012). Its influence on gender-norm transformation likewise tends to be gradual and highly contingent upon how religious leaders facilitate dialogue concerning equality, as demonstrated in a faith-based community dialogue program in rural Uganda (Sileo et al., 2022, 2024). Religious institutions, including women's ecclesiastical fellowships such as the PWGT, have similarly been shown to function as community social-capital nodes that support women's health and well-being (Dauner & Wilmot, 2019).

The results of hypothesis testing for H4 and H5 indicate that social capital exerts a significant influence on social inclusion ($\beta = 0.40$; $p < 0.001$), and that social inclusion, in turn, exerts a significant influence on gender-equitable communication ($\beta = 0.29$; $p = 0.004$). The results of mediation testing (H6) indicate that social inclusion partially mediates the relationship between social capital and gender-equitable communication (indirect effect = 0.116; $p = 0.035$), signifying that social capital influences gender-equitable communication both directly and through enhanced women's engagement in congregational and village decision-making forums. This finding reinforces the argument that empowerment-oriented civil society organizations and social networks including women's ecclesiastical fellowships function as brokers that convert social capital into tangible women's influence within congregational and village governance (Diprose, 2023). Research on the P2WKSS program further affirms that communication strategies leveraging face-to-face forums, informal gatherings, and digital media are effective in enhancing inclusion and inter-community trust in advancing the transformation of women's roles (Yulianti et al., 2025).

Taken together, these findings indicate that empowerment strategies for women leaders in Tana Toraja and North Toraja must be multidimensional in character: strengthening educational capital through communication-skills and ministry-leadership training for female pastors and PWGT officials; expanding social capital through cross-congregational and cross-institutional networks; reinterpreting Christian faith values in support of equality; and creating tangible social-inclusion spaces within congregational and village deliberative forums. The synergy of these four elements is consonant with the agenda of the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5) on gender equality, which underscores the importance of contextually grounded, cross-sectoral approaches including the role of the local church in the empowerment of rural women leaders (Wonde, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that educational capital, social capital, and religiosity jointly contribute positively to the realization of gender-equitable communication among rural women leaders in Tana Toraja and North Toraja comprising female pastors, chairpersons of the Toraja Church Women's Fellowship (PWGT), PKK officials, and other female religious figures with social capital constituting the predictor of greatest influence. Social inclusion is shown to function as a partial mediator bridging the relationship between social capital ownership and the realization of equitable communication, indicating that women's tangible engagement in congregational and village decision-making forums constitutes a critical pathway for converting social resources into equitable influence and voice. The practical implications of these findings underscore the need for integrated rural women's empowerment policy, encompassing the strengthening of leadership education and communication skills for female pastors and PWGT officials, the facilitation of cross-congregational and cross-institutional networks, the engagement of female religious figures as agents of normative change, and the institutionalization of social-inclusion mechanisms within congregational and village deliberative forums. Future research is recommended to employ primary data drawn from a broader population for instance, encompassing the entirety of Toraja Church classes across South Sulawesi and to consider additional contextual variables, such as local government policy support and synodical church support, in order to enrich understanding of the dynamics underlying the empowerment of rural women leaders' communication in the Toraja region.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors express sincere gratitude to the 60 women leaders of Tana Toraja and North Toraja Regency who willingly participated in this study. The authors gratefully acknowledge the research grant awarded by the Directorate of Research and Community Service, Directorate General of Research and Development, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, under the Regular Fundamental Research Grant Scheme, fiscal year 2025 (Grant No. SP DIPA-139.04.1.693320/2025, 4th revision, dated 30 April 2025), awarded to the research team from Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja and Universitas Kristen Indonesia Paulus.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, J.R.T. B.S., and A.T.; Methodology, J.R.T. and B.S.; Software, B.S.; Formal Analysis, B.S. and A.T.; Investigation, J.R.T., B.S. and A.T.; Data Curation, A.T.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, J.R.T.; Writing – Review & Editing, B.S. and A.T.; Visualization, A.T.; Supervision, J.R.T.; Project Administration, J.R.T.; Funding Acquisition, J.R.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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