# Indigenous Women's Perspectives on Gender Equality and Feminism: A Case Study of Jahai Women in Peninsular Malaysia

# Rafidah Abd Karim<sup>1</sup>, Ramlee Mustapha<sup>2</sup>, Norwaliza Abdul Wahab<sup>3</sup>, Mohd Hasrol Haffiz Aliasak<sup>4</sup>, Nurul Farhani Che Ghani<sup>5</sup> and Nurul Shatirah Zainol<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch Tapah Campus, Perak, Malaysia <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Technical and Vocational, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia <sup>3</sup>Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Architecture, Planning, and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, Malaysia

<sup>5</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch Tapah Campus, Perak, Malaysia

<sup>6</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, Malaysia

feida16@uitm.edu.my drramlee@yahoo.com norwaliza@fpm.upsi.edu.my haffiz677@uitm.edu.my farhani8045@uitm.edu.my nurulshatirah293@gmail.com

Abstract: Most research on gender equality and feminism have been concentrated on non-indigenous women worldwide, with very few studies focusing specifically on Jahai tribe women. Indigenous women are important in advancing the ideas of feminism and gender equality within their societies. This paper is a case study focuses on the indigenous women which is the Jahai tribe women in Royal Belum State Park, Malaysia. In this case study, we explored Jahai women's perspectives of gender equality and feminism aspects in this indigenous society. This case study employed a quantitative and a qualitative method for data collection. A total of 20 Jahai women were selected to complete a set of questionnaires and five of them were chosen for the in-depth interview. From the study, there were four main themes that emerged including socioeconomic equality, equal treatment, gender responsibilities and egalitarian leadership and decision-making prospects. This research study was guided by the Transnational Feminism Theory and Theory of Gender Equality approach. The findings revealed that there was the similarities and distinctions perceptions in gender equality and feminism aspects among Jahai women. The study's conclusions shed new light on the gender equality and feminism interpretations and challenges those women in indigenous societies face. As a result, this study is important for future research since it adds to the body of knowledge about gender equality and concerns pertaining to indigenous women.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, Feminism, Indigenous Society, Jahai Women

# 1. Introduction

Many scholars have argued that gender equality is one of the human right issues that has been addressed and acknowledged by many. Feminism is not only vital for women, but also for people of all sexes, genders, social classes, and beliefs, and the belief of feminism only benefits women, is a misconception (Jiménez-Moya et al., 2022). In contrast, gender equality highlights the condition in which every individual, irrespective of gender, enjoys equal rights and chances for personal growth and development. Many past studies related to this indigenous community were conducted, however most of the studies only discussed the issues related to their education, health, and their lifestyles. There is a gap in the corpus of knowledge related to feminism and gender equality within the indigenous community, and very few existing literatures that discussed on the two subjects can be found. Thus, for Malaysia to be able to achieve both feminism and gender equality in its society, as much as the involvement from the majorities of the nation matters, the involvement of indigenous society in realizing this effort is also crucial. Hence, this research attempts to examine the perspectives of feminism and gender equality aspects among Jahai women in indigenous society of Malaysia.

#### 2. Literature Review

# 2.1 Gender Equality and Feminism

Gender equality research is no longer a relatively new subject of inquiry within the research community, and numerous researchers have been focusing on carrying out the research in relation to this topic of study. The United Nations (UN, 2022) described gender equality as the concept that stressed on providing the equal opportunities and privileges for both men and women in the society. It was stated that despite the progress over the last decades, gender equality persisted and affected women more than men in the society. The opportunities for women to obtain the equal opportunities in terms of education, enjoy the discrimination and violence free society, as well as the ability for both men and women to work alongside each other in the society can be achieved through the realization of gender equality. Gender equality refers to the idea that all people, men and women, boys and girls, have equal access to opportunities, resources, and treatment in order to fulfil their potential, uphold their human rights and dignity, and contribute to and profit from political, social, cultural, and economic advancement (Guthridge et al., 2022). Despite numerous research that have been conducted, gender equality however is still far from reach and inequality between genders is still persistent up until now both in the developed as well as in developing countries. According to Papadakis (2018), the gender stereotype exists within the early children's education curriculum. This proves that social stereotypes are being instilled among the younger generations which will result in continuous gender equality issues in the future. Karim et al. (2023) found that the Jahai women in Royal Belum did not experience any inequalities especially particularly when it comes to splitting up home chores, as the respondents stated that their husbands assisted and participated in this regard.

In discussions of women development and empowerment, feminism topic is inevitable to be included in the debate. The Transnational Feminism Theory which was first used by Grewal and Kaplan (1994), is a theory that is very closely related in encouraging women's social development. The theory explores discrepancies and inequalities among women, such as diverse objectives and approaches to comprehending gender issues, and refutes the idea that women everywhere experience the same kinds of oppressions, forms of exploitation, and privileges. (Enns et al., 2020). Transnational Feminism is a movement that fights for gender justice and women's rights across national boundaries, which include women's voting rights, educational and economic rights (Desai, 2023). Within the indigenous community however, there has been a gap in addressing the feminism issues, as supported by Dattaray (2015), where it was stated that feminists' scholars viewed indigenous women as insignificant subjects of study. This shows that although feminism has been discussed for so long, indigenous women are however still excluded from being the subjects of study, which proves the urgency of including indigenous women as subjects of feminism study. Padzil and Somiah (2023) stated that the Orang Asli society shown that they refused to appoint only one man or one woman as the leader and they nowadays believe that indigenous women are also entitled to the rights towards leadership.

### 2.2 The Jahai Tribe of Malaysia

According to Mat Dong et al. (2022), the Orang Asli refers to Malaysia's first indigenous inhabitants who have lived in Malaysia's thick rain forests for 5,000 years ago. They also presented that there are 18 tribes of Orang Asli which are divided into three primary subgroups, which are the Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay. The Jahai tribe was selected as the main subject of study for this research. This tribe resides in Royal Belum State Park, Malaysia have mostly continued to live nomadic, forest-based lives, which include making sporadic settlements and depending mostly on activities and products from the forest for food and revenue (WWF Malaysia, 2007). Loke et al. (2020) presented that the Jahai hunter-gatherers belongs to the Negrito subgroup, and they inhabit the area around Royal Belum State Park, one of the most significant conservation locations in the Peninsular Malaysia. Many Jahai people rely on fishing and hunting as their primary means of sustenance. Karim et al. (2023) stated that Jahai people continue to live a nomadic lifestyle and frequently relocate due to disease, death, internal conflicts, scarcity of food, and the arrival of new family members.



Figure 1: The indigenous women from the Jahai tribe in Malaysia

# 3. Purpose of Study

This study aims to explore the gender equality and feminism aspects in indigenous society in Malaysia, specifically within the Jahai women tribe. In this study, we formulated three research questions as following:

- 1. What are Jahai women's perspectives of gender equality aspects?
- 2. What are Jahai women's perspectives of feminism aspects?
- 3. How Jahai women perceived gender equality and feminism aspects?

#### 4. Method

This study focuses on Jahai women and this case study employed a quantitative method. Besides, this study also utilised a qualitative method for data collection. In this methodology section, we presented the details in several subsections as the following.

#### 4.1 Research Site

The research site for this study is in the Royal Belum State Park, Malaysia, which is the settlement area for Jahai tribe. Two selected research sites that were involved in this study were in Kampung Klewang and Kampung Sungai Tiang. Originally gazetted as Belum Forest Reserve in 1971, the Royal Belum State Park was designated as National Heritage in 2007 to support ecotourism, research, and education has been referred to as the hotspot for biodiversity because it provides a range of ecosystems and habitats for the many species of plants and animals that make Malaysia and its surroundings home. Many of these species are rare, threatened, or native to the region.

#### 4.2 Participant

The study involved a total of 20 indigenous women among Jahai tribe from Kampung Klewang and Kampung Sungai Tiang at Royal Belum State Park, Malaysia. A stratified random sampling was used to collect data from the questionnaire whereas a snowballing sampling was used to collect data from the interviews. From this total of participants, 5 Jahai women were selected for the semi-structured interview sessions. For the snowball sampling technique, the selected participants of the interviews were based on the suggestions from the headman. The women participants involved were in the mean age of 41 years old.

# 4.3 Instrument

In this case study, we designed and utilised two instruments which were the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview as the instruments for collecting data of the study. First, the questionnaire was distributed to answer research question 1 and research question 2 which were to examine the Jahai women's perspectives of gender equality and feminism aspects. The questionnaire consisted of 8 items of respondent's profile (Part A) ,17 items to determine the perspectives of feminism aspects (Part B) and 18 items to determine the perspectives of gender equality aspects (Part C). To answer research question 3, the semi-structured interview was employed to explore the Jahai women's ideas, emotions, and convictions about the gender equality and feminism aspects, and get extensively into private issues.

#### 4.4 Data Collection Procedures

In this study, we distributed the questionnaire to 20 Jahai women. The data was collected to examine their perceptions of gender equality and feminism aspects. Then, we selected 5 women from these total participants and carried out the semi-structured interview sessions. We gave the open-ended questions to the participants for exploring in-depth perceptions of Jahai women on gender equality and feminism aspects.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed during the data collection process for this study. The questionnaire data was analyzed using the SPSS software version 26. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data from the interviews. For the semi-structured interview data, we verified the accuracy of the transcription after listening to each audio recording. Line by line examination of all the data was done, and thematic analysis (Atlas.ti software) along with continuous data comparison were used to identify and code the major categories and themes. All the data was coded, verified, and discussed by the researchers.

# 5. Results and Discussion

The study's results are presented in this section. The questionnaire has a total of 43 items that consisted of 8 items for respondent profile and 35 items for the respondents' perspectives parts. The data analysis from the questionnaire and semi-structured interview were presented in two main parts: (i) the quantitative and (ii) the qualitative. Table 1 depicted the profile of the respondents for this study.

#### 5.1 Profile of the Respondents

The respondent profile of the study as shown in Table 1. The total number of indigenous women from Jahai tribe involved in this study is 20. There are five categories of age groups in this study. The highest category of age group involved in this study is below 20 years, which is 50% respondents. The age group of 30-39 years is 20% respondents. The responders are individuals 50 years of age and older, which is 15% respondents and the age group of 40-49 years which is 10% respondents. Only 5% of respondents come from the age group of 20-29 years. All respondents were married (100%). Regarding the number of children, most respondents have 1-3 children, which is 65%. The respondents who have 4-6 children is the second highest (30%) in the group. 5% of respondents have many children which is 7-9 children. In terms of level of education, most respondents do not go to school, which is 40% respondents. Several of them attended primary school, which is 30% respondents. Likewise, 30% of them also attended secondary school. No one goes to higher institutions for education. The analysis also shows their husband's level of education, majority of their husband went to primary school which is 60% respondents. 35% of respondents answered that their husband did not go to school. Only 5% of respondents said that their husband attended secondary school followed by no one responded that their husband went to higher institution for studying. All respondents said that they have a job whereas their husbands also have a job which is 90% respondents. Only 2% of respondents said that their husbands do not have a job. All respondents countered that they do not hold any position in the indigenous society.

Table 1: Profile of Jahai Tribe Women (n=20)

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Age (years)		
Below 20	10	50.0
20-29	1	5.0
30-39	4	20.0
40-49	2	10.0
50 and above	3	15.0
Marital Status		
Married	20	100.0
Number of Children		
None	0	0

Characteristics	Frequency	%
1-3	13	65.0
4-6	6	30.0
7-9	1	5.0
Level of Education		
Higher Institution	0	0
Secondary School	6	30.0
Primary School	6	30.0
Not schooling	8	40.0
Husband Level of Education		
Higher Institution	0	0
Secondary School	1	5.0
Primary School	12	60.0
Not schooling	7	35.0
I have a job		
Yes	20	100.0
No	0	0
Husband has a job		
Yes	18	90.0
No	2	10.0
Have a position in the indigenous society		
Yes	0	0
No	20	0

# 5.2 Quantitative Data Analysis Results

This part presents the quantitatve data analysis results from the questionnaire. The results were presented in two main parts which are the perceptions of feminism aspects and the perceptions of gender equality aspect among Jahai tribe women. Five components made up the interpretation of the study's mean values. The 5-point Likert Scale was used as the description: Strongly Agree (4.21-5.00), Agree (3.41-4.20), Uncertain (2.61-3.40), Disagree (1.81-2.60) and Strongly Disagree (1.00-1.80). We presented the three highest mean and the three lowest mean values results.

Table 2 displayed 17 items that measured the perceptions of feminism aspect among Jahai women respondents. The results indicated that most respondents strongly agreed, according to the three highest means. (M=4.90; SD=0.31) that they feel secure living in their village (item 5). Next, the respondents also strongly agreed (M=4.35; SD=0.49) that they know that they are not supposed to get hit (item 8). Item 7, which had the third-highest mean score, indicated that the respondents agreed (M=4.15; SD=0.88) that they are aware that, going back a long way, they have been regarded the same as Jahai men. Regarding the three lowest means, the first lowest mean value showed that the respondents disagreed (M=1.70; SD=1.22) that women can become a leader in my community in item 15. After that, item 12 was presented, suggesting that the participants did not agree (M=2.25; SD=1.12) that their teacher looked down on them in school. Finally, the same results of mean values showed the respondents also disagreed (M=2.45; SD=1.23) that other students of different races were routinely bullying them (item 10) and they believed that their friends of different races avoided them in conversation at school (item 11).

**Table 2: Feminism Aspect Perspectives by Jahai Women** 

Item	Statement	M	SD	Interpretation
1	I can speak about any issue without my spouse's approval	4.05	1.40	Agree
2	I believe other people can accept my opinion	3.60	1.27	Agree
3	I do not need approval from my husband to go anywhere	3.15	1.63	Uncertain

Item	Statement	M	SD	Interpretation
4	I can go to work without my husband's approval to get money	3.15	1.80	Uncertain
5	I live in a safe society	4.90	0.31	Strongly Agree
6	As the Jahai woman, I know my rights	3.10	1.29	Uncertain
7	I understand that since a long time ago I am treated the same as Jahai men	4.15	0.88	Agree
8	I should not be hit by anyone	4.35	0.49	Strongly Agree
9	I have everything that I need in my life	2.50	1.19	Disagree
10	I was regularly being bullied by people from other races at school	2.45	1.23	Disagree
11	I think races did not like to speak to me	2.45	1.23	Disagree
12	My teacher looked down on me in school	2.25	1.12	Disagree
13	I was gazed strangely by the strangers I went outside	3.10	1.12	Uncertain
14	I think the government helps given to Jahai women are not fair	2.40	0.82	Disagree
15	Women can become a leader in my community	1.70	1.22	Disagree
16	I can speak my opinion in any cultural ceremony	3.15	1.57	Uncertain
17	I help the headman to resolve the problems in the society	2.55	1.61	Disagree
	Total average	3.16	0.24	Uncertain

According to Table 3, there are 18 items showed the perceptions of gender equality aspect among Jahai women respondents. Item 7 revealed that the respondents firmly believed that Jahai women take better care of the children than males, as evidenced by the first highest mean value (M=4.70; SD=0.92). With regards to item 17, many respondents strongly agreed (M=4.35; SD=0.93) that they can certainly get medicine when they are sick. The last highest mean value are item 16 and item 18. The results show that the respondents strongly agreed (M=4.25; SD=1.21) that they can use a phone to talk to people for item 18 and highly agreed (M=4.25; SD=0.91) that they had a house to live in for item 16. The results indicated that, regarding the lowest mean value (item 11), respondents disagreed (M=1.85; SD=1.18) that they find forest products profitable. The respondents disagreed (M=1.90; SD=1.17) with item 12 as well, saying that they would not track for wildlife in the forest to obtain money. In item 9, the respondents were unsure (M=2.75; SD=1.83) about planting trees for financial gain, as indicated by the lowest mean value.

Table 3: Gender Equality Aspect Perspectives by Jahai Women

Item	Statement	М	SD	Interpretation
1	Jahai women practice Jahai culture more than men	3.00	1.26	Uncertain
2	I acquired Sewang dance from my mother	3.85	0.88	Agree
3	I perform Sewang dance and I continue the inherited beliefs more than men	3.95	0.10	Agree
4	More than Jahai males, Jahai women have a regard for taboos	3.10	1.29	Uncertain
5	I converse with people in Jahai more often than men do	2.95	1.23	Uncertain
6	Jahai women protect the culture more than men	3.10	1.25	Uncertain
7	Jahai women take care of the children more than men	4.70	0.92	Strongly Agree
8	I give more to the Jahai community than to men	3.25	1.29	Uncertain
9	I grow trees in order to make money	2.75	1.83	Uncertain
10	I make handicrafts to help my family income	3.25	1.74	Uncertain
11	I look for forest products to earn money	1.85	1.18	Disagree
12	I trail for wildlife in the forest to get money	1.90	1.17	Disagree
13	As Jahai woman, I go to work to get money	3.50	0.83	Agree
14	I have food to eat daily	3.00	1.52	Uncertain
15	I have clothes to be worn daily	3.90	1.21	Agree
16	I live in a house	4.25	0.91	Strongly Agree
17	When I am sick, I easily have medicine	4.35	0.93	Strongly Agree
18	I can talk to other people on the phone	4.25	1.21	Strongly Agree
	Total average	3.38	0.48	Uncertain

# **5.3 Qualitative Data Analysis Results**

The study's second set of findings includes the semi-structured interviewing process presents the qualitative data. There were no outsiders present during the researcher and informant's interview sessions. For a more comprehensive understanding, the data and information from the interview sessions are transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to explore the perspectives of gender equality and feminism aspects.

Therefore, the semi-structured interview findings revealed four main themes: (1) socio-economic equality, (2) equal treatment, (3) gender responsibilities and egalitarian leadership and (4) decision-making prospects.

#### 5.3.1 Socio-Economic Equality

First, a theme was identified from the thematic analysis was socio-economic equality. The interviews with Jahai women revealed that they had positive opinions on the socio-economic aspect. Most of Jahai men work as forest product gatherer and seller, hunter, and fisherman. Conversely, Jahai women do not work, and they are mostly housewives. Respondent 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 from Jahai tribe women provided the same response, stating that they are housewives who stay at home instead of going to work.

"No... only my husband works to earn money. He works as a fisherman". (Respondent 1, 2 and Respondent 5)

"My husband works as honey collector and fisherman. I am a housewife". ( Respondent 3)

Therefore, the primary source of income for Jahai women is their spouse's revenue generation for the household. This theme supports the gender equality aspects perspectives that showed the Jahai women were treated equally by men and they shared their responsibilities in socio-economic aspect as husband and wife in getting source of income for the family.

# 5.3.2 Equal Treatment

Equal treatment emerged as the second theme based on the semi-structured interview results. Respondent 1 and Respondent 2 said that men had more opportunities than women in the indigenous society. Other respondents agreed that they were treated equally and they were given freedom for schooling and voice out their opinions. According to Kamaruddin and Jusoh's (2008) study, the Orang Asli populations' income, employment prospects, and general well-being are significantly influenced by their level of education. Unlike other responses, Respondent 4 highlighted that there is a difference treatment between women and men in her society. While men go to work, women are supposed take responsibility for the family at home.

"Yes... men have more advantages. However, we have freedom to go for schooling and voice out our opinions". (Respondent 1 and Respondent 2)

"Men and women are treated the same. Yes...I can voice out my opinions". (Respondent 5)

"Yes... male and female treatment differs from one another. Men are able to work, and women should stay at home to care for the family." (Respondent 4)

Overall, the responses from the respondents showed disagreement regarding the equal treatment among Jahai women in the society. However, they are being treated well related to freedom for schooling and giving opinion in their society. The results also demonstrated how gender stereotypes are created by the way men and women are categorized differently in society and the assumptions that this causes regarding the traits unique to each gender (Koenig & Eagly, 2014).

#### 5.3.3 Gender Responsibilities and Egalitarian Leadership

The study's third major finding concerned about gender roles and equal leadership. Four respondents (Respondent 1, 2, 3 and 5) agreed that men have more responsibilities than men except for Respondet 4 who said that women have more responsibilities than men in family and society. From the analysis, it displayed that men and women have their own responsibilities in family and society. They are also acknowledged their own roles in contributing their effort toward the family and society.

"Men have bigger responsibilites...". Women in this village can become a leader if they are given the opportunities". (Respondent1, 2, 3 and 5)

"Women have bigger responsibilties...we need to take care of children and husband when they are sick...and we need to do house chores and help people in difficulties". (Respondent 4)

Although women in leadership are essential to achieve gender equality, in comparison to men, they are less likely to hold positions of coveted leadership. (Appelbaum et al., 2013; Galsanjigmed at al., 2023). The Jahai women mostly serves as a housewife. However, the Jahai women hope that they also can be a leader in the indigenous society. As a result, if given the chance to lead their community, they can now take on greater responsibility and enhance their positions by getting implicated in actions pertaining to leadership. It conveys the rights of women to assume greater responsibility and rights in the workplace by means of gender-responsive policies that cater to their distinct needs and objectives, irrespective of their gender.

#### 5.3.4 Decision-Making Prospects

This analysis also revealed the emerged theme on Jahai women contribution in decision making prospects. Most respondents concurred that everyone has an equal chance to make their own judgments. All respondents answered that they are allowed to make decision for themselves, family and society. However, Respondent 2 and 3 mentioned that they need to seek permission from their husband in decision making. The argument posits that involving men and women in taking decisions broadens the skill set of each group, enhances decision-making, expands perspectives to comprehend issues thoroughly, fosters creativity and invention, and lessens conflict.

"Yes...I can do my own decision for myself ,my family and my society (Respondent 1, Respondent 4 and Respondent 5)

"I have to ask my husband before I make decision". (Respondent 2 and Respondent 3)

The opportunity for women decision-making adds to the advantages of diversity in the Jahai community, as women are more considerate of others' needs, particularly when it comes to handling personal relationships or family issues. Additionally, they are prepared to discuss ideas with others in their community and work towards achieving understanding among Jahai people. Thus, these four main themes highlighted that the Jahai women's perspectives of feminism and gender equality aspects contributes to new knowledge in this field of the study. This study contributes to the exploration of new studies about indigenous feminism and gender equality in indigenous society.

# 6. Conclusion

The Jahai tribe women is valuable contributors to the indigenous community's advancement of feminism and gender equality in Malaysia. The study's findings demonstrated that the roles that men and women are equally acknowledged by society, as well as their similarities and distinctions. The study's findings demonstrated that there were four major themes initiated in this study which are socio-economic equality, equal treatment, gender responsibilities and egalitarian leadership and decision-making aspects. All the themes illustrate the importance of gender equality and feminism aspects within Jahai women in indigenous society. Besides, they are fundamental in advancing the ideas of feminism and gender equality. Closing gender gaps among Malaysia's indigenous people could result in gender equality and the liberation of Jahai women in this indigenous civilization. Theoretically, this case study advances new concepts on indigenous feminism and gender equality, particularly about the indigenous people of Malaysia. In summary, these findings of the study may contribute to a new understanding that decision-makers will use as a reference, a roadmap and assist social stakeholders to address the issues of gender equality globally.

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