

Malaysia's Orang Asli Women Roles in Indigenous Community

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Abstract: Globally, there are still many occurring social issues that may be a hindrance towards the achievement of the overall development of a nation, and one of them is gender equality. Although it is a social issue that can affect the society, gender equality however affects women more than men as it can put women at a more disadvantaged situations such as limited access towards good health and education, lower financial status, lower employment opportunities, and more. Gender equality should be properly addressed to ensure that women can enjoy the opportunities and rights that they deserved as part of the members of the society. In this study, we investigated the Orang Asli women roles from a selected tribes in Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to explore how Orang Asli women contribute to the preservation of the indigenous community's culture, language, and beliefs. This study employed a qualitative case study research design. To obtain data, a semi-structured interviewing tool was used. We collected and analysed data from Orang Asli women as participants of the study. The study's findings demonstrated that the Orang Asli women had meaningful roles in their community. The study's conclusions are designed to provide insight into how indigenous women can carry out their responsibilities in promoting gender equality and sustainable development in the indigenous community.

Keywords: Gender equality, Indigenous Community, Orang Asli, Women

1. Introduction

Gender inequality is evident in various domains of an individual's life, including but not limited to health, education, employment, and politics and compared to men, gender equality often affects and put women more at a disadvantage. Gender equality is commonly misunderstood to be primarily a women's issue, yet when it is not realized, it can have a detrimental impact on the whole society. According to the study conducted by Bayeh (2016), Ethiopia cannot attain sustainable development through the active participation of men alone, not until women also are granted control and gender equality. This proves that the development of a nation may be hindered when equality is not achieved by women. Gender equality does not imply that men and women must become the same. Gender equality pertains to the fair acknowledgement by society of the attributes and distinctions between men and women, together with the roles they fulfil. Upon birth, a boy or a girl are socially entitled with certain gender roles, and as clarified by Namibia (2013), gender roles are known as the actions, duties, and responsibilities that a society deems proper for boys, girls. As gender equality stressed on equal opportunities for both men and women, in life, it can act as a medium to diminish the socially constructed gender roles of men and women, as well as eliminating the gender discrimination within the society. Within the minority community of Malaysia who are known as the Orang Asli, it is believed that men are superior to women, and that women are weaker than men. The matter only got worse when the government representatives, business owners, and television have all promoted similar narratives of Orang Asli cultural inferiority in general and its female dependency on men (Karim et al., 2021). Orang Asli community possess their own unique customs, languages, and beliefs that were inherited from their ancestors, and every person, including the Orang

Asli women, has their own significant roles to protect those customs from being corrupted or lost due to modernization. It is relevant to examine the roles played by Orang Asli women in Malaysia in maintaining their culture, traditions, and values. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the roles played by Orang Asli women and whether they are significant within their own group.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Orang Asli : Temiar and Semai Tribes in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia are commonly known as the Orang Asli. According to Wook (2016), the phrase "Orang Asli" refers to Peninsular Malaysia's initial or early settlers. Endicott (2016) on the other hand stated that in the 1960s, the Malaysian government replaced the demeaning English name "Aborigines" and the Malay term "Sakai" with the phrase "Orang Asli," which means "original people" in Malay. The Orang Asli community can be categorized into three main ethnic groups namely, the Negrito, the Senoi, and the Proto Malay. With 97,856 members, Senoi is the biggest tribe, while Proto Malay is the second largest group which is constructed of 75,332 members, and the Negrito group remain as the smallest Orang Asli group which consists of 5,009 members (Mahmud et al., 2022). The three major ethnic groups are further classified into 18 smaller sub-ethnic groups, comprising 1.1 percent of the population of Peninsular Malaysia. Out of the 18 tribes, this current study solely focused on participants from two tribes within the Senoi group, which are from the Semai and Temiar tribe. According to the Department of Orang Asli Department (JAKOA, 2023) by the year 2023 the whole population of Orang Asli comprises a total of 215,215 individuals, where there is a total of 4,193 Mah Meri people, 6,380 Jah Hut people, 557 Che Wong people, 531 Mendriq people, and 415 Lanoh people. The Kensiu tribe has a total of 292 people, the Kintak tribe with 203 people, the Jahai tribe with 2,915 people, the Bateq tribe with 2,190 people, and the Temuan tribe with 34,661 people. There is also a total of 41,081 people of Jakun tribe, 100 people of Orang Kanaq tribe, 5,038 people of Orang Kuala tribe, 1,856 people of Orang Seletar tribe, while 7,795 people of Semelai tribe. Out of the 18 tribes, this current study solely focused on participants from two tribes within the Senoi group, which are from the Semai and Temiar tribe. By the year 2023, the collective population of the Temiar people amounts to 37,489 individuals, with 19,338 Temiar men and 18,151 Temiar women, while the total population of the Semai people are 61,336 people, where 30,981 are Semai men and 30,355 are Semai women (JAKOA, 2023). The Semai made up the majority population of Orang Asli community, and the vast majority of Semai villages are in the mountains and foothills of northwest Pahang and southern Perak (Ching & Ross, 2015). Similar to the Semai, the Temiar people also come from the Senoic tribe and according to Khori (2022), majority of the Temiar reside in the state of Perak and the isolated region of Hulu Kelantan, however, a small number of Temiar can be found to reside in the states of Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, and Selangor.

2.2 The Culture and Beliefs of Orang Asli

In working towards the progress of the nation, modernisations and transformations programs have been drafted and carried out by the government. Although modernizations may contribute a lot and work for the realization of a nation's development, they may as well disrupt and challenge the sustenance of cultural practice and beliefs of the indigenous people. Indigenous people highly value their inherited culture and traditional beliefs and practices as they represent their identity. UNESCO (2019) stated that for Indigenous people, protecting their living heritage is essential because it forms the foundation of their identities and cultures, and the ongoing preservation of this heritage will inevitably reinforce the identities and cultures of Indigenous peoples. Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia are among the many indigenous community that still preserve their inherited cultural practices. Kardooni et al. (2014) stated that the Orang Asli people historically resided in the forest, and due to this, the Orang Asli possess an immense amount of traditional knowledge related to forests, lakes, rivers, collecting forests products, farming, hunting, and gardening. In terms of the Semai people's beliefs, Chua et al. (2021) presented that the idea of family was interpreted differently in the Semai society where for the Semai, a family comprises not only biological relatives but also members of the community and those who have a common bond with *nyenang*, or spirit ancestors in the language of the Semai, as well as cultural heritage. As for the Temiar people, according to Khairuddin and Hanafiah (2021), the community practices and believes in animism, and they have faith in the spirits of inanimate objects, which includes the spirits of creatures such as animals and plants. Other tradition that is well known among Orang Asli community is the *Sewang* dance. Sucira (2016) explained that *Sewang* dance which is still performed until today is the traditional dance of Orang Asli this dance is performed for a variety of reasons, including for amusement, festival celebration, as well as for

medical needs. This tradition is a popular form of entertainment, and it existed in each village of Orang Asli tribes, however, each village has its own dance. Like other Orang Asli tribes, *Sewang* dance is also existing within both Semai and Temiar community. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Orang Asli community own a vast set of unique cultural practices and cultural practices. Hence, more efforts need to be done to protect the culture, identity, and the existence of this minority group. Figure 1 shows the *Sewang* dance that is very well known among the Orang Asli community.



Figure 1: The *Sewang* dance of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia.

2.3 Gender Equality

Gender equality is considered as one of the constructs that should be achieved by all developing or developed countries, to fully attain the ultimate progress of a country. The concept of gender equality states that women and men, girls and boys, should have equal access to opportunities, treatment, and circumstances in order to help them fulfill their human rights, contribute to and benefit from political, social, cultural, and economic development, and help them realize their full potential (UNICEF, 2017). It can be understood that when women and men, girls, and boys, have equal rights, chances and prospects in life, and the ability to direct their own lives and make contributions to society, gender equality has been attained. Shang (2022) suggested that there are five crucial elements that need to be addressed in tackling the gender equality in the society which are (1) gender gaps must be distinguished from gender inequity, (2) gender equality is gaining attention, but there is still more work to be done to completely eliminate it, (3) everyone gains from eliminating gender inequity, not just women, (4) to alleviate gender equality, broad policies as well as gender-specific policies can be helpful, and (5) the goal of tackling gender inequality should be to eradicate its underlying causes rather than begin with measures aimed at them. Moving forward, it is essential for the future researchers and scholars to consider these five key elements in their study, to properly address the subject of gender equality in the society. Asri et al. (2018) presented profound findings in addressing the subject of gender equality within the indigenous community. The findings of the study described that the Orang Asli women's involvement in the entrepreneurship field open the door for women improvement and empowerment, and it also acts as the medium for women to seek gender equality as it allows them to earn their own income and be financially independent.

3. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore how Malaysia's Orang Asli women contribute to the preservation of the indigenous community's culture, language, and beliefs for promoting gender equality and sustainable development. The objectives of the study are as follow:

1. To explore Orang Asli women's role in contributing towards the preservation of the indigenous community's culture, beliefs, and languages.
2. To explore gender equality aspects in Orang Asli community towards the sustainable development in indigenous community.

4. Methodology

The roles of Orang Asli women in preserving the culture, language, and beliefs in their community were investigated in this study. A qualitative case study was employed as a research design. We used a semi-structured interview as an instrument of this study. A total of 8 Orang Asli women was selected randomly as a sample of the study. The study was conducted in RPS Kuala Betis, Gua Musang, Kelantan, as well as in Kampung Batu 7, Tapah, Perak, which is the settlement area of the Semai tribe. The data collected in this study were quantitatively analysed, and for this purpose, the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti 8 was used to facilitate the data analysis process. The next section of this paper presents the findings and conclusions of the study derived from the data analysis procedures.

4.1 Participants of the Study

Regarding the participants, we selected 8 respondents from these two tribes, of which 4 of them were from the Temiar tribe, and another 4 from the Semai tribe. In this study, only Orang Asli women were chosen as the respondents, therefore, all the involved women participants shared the same inclusion criteria, in which all the participants involved belonged to the Orang Asli community. Since there were two Orang Asli tribe involved in this study, the study was also conducted in two research sites.

4.2 Research Site

This study is a study that featured the indigenous people as its subjects of study, hence this study was carried out in the Orang Asli community's settlement area. This study was conducted in Kampung Batu 7, Tapah, Perak, and in RPS Kuala Betis, Gua Musang, Kelantan. Kampung Batu 7 was selected as the research site as the area is a settlement area for the Semai community, while RPS Kuala Betis was chosen as the research site for the similar reason. It is the settlement area of the Temiar community, and it is also one of the biggest Temiar community's settlement areas in Peninsular Malaysia.

4.3 Data Collection

The primary research design in this study was the qualitative case study. The research tools used to gather the data for the study were semi-structured interviews. This instrument was used as with the use of this technique, researchers will obtain open-ended data, discover the opinions, sentiments, and ideas of respondents regarding the subject, and explore deeper into their personal matters. This study involved 8 random samples of Orang Asli women, where 4 of the respondents belong to the Semai tribe, while the remaining 4 respondents belong to the Temiar tribe. All 8 Orang Asli women were interviewed, and every interview with the respondents was recorded for the purpose of collecting notes.

4.4 Data Analysis

For this study, a qualitative analysis was performed on the data acquired. In this study, the analytical methodology employed was the thematic analysis. The Atlas.ti 8 software, which facilitates the qualitative data analysis processes, was used to analyse the data of this study, which all was obtained using the semi-structured interviews. The Atlas.ti 8 software was specifically used to help with the data coding and theme extraction processes throughout the data analysis phase. The following section of this paper presents the findings from the data analyses.

5. Results and Discussion

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the research instruments to collect the data. Thematic analysis was utilized as the analytical strategy for this study to measure the data that had been gathered. The analyses on the data were conducted to provide better understandings on the Orang Asli women's roles from Temiar and Semai tribes, within their society. The thematic analysis conducted showed that there are four emerging themes which are managing household duties, providing income for the family institutions, preservation of culture and beliefs, and responsibilities in family and society.

5.1 Theme 1: Managing Household Duties

The first theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was managing household duties. This theme elaborated on the Orang Asli women's roles and tasks that they carried out and highlighted the contributions made by Orang Asli women in managing their daily household matters. The responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the respondents showed that Orang Asli women played major roles in carrying out the household tasks within their family. The respondents also shared their experiences in sharing the household workloads with their partner, and some shared their views on the importance of household tasks divisions. Interestingly, the response obtained from Respondent 5 illustrated that apart from managing household tasks, Orang Asli women also played another important role in their household, which is in educating their children in terms of using their indigenous language.

"At home, wives take care of household duties like cleaning. My spouse assists me in caring for the kids." (Respondent 1, Temiar woman)

"While I wash the dishes, my husband mows the lawn. I believe that men and women should work together to complete household responsibilities since cooperation is necessary" (Respondent 2, Temiar woman)

"At home, I have to speak to our family members and kids in "Semai" language" (Respondent 7, Semai woman)

Remarkably, it is impressive to discover that within their family institutions, Orang Asli women achieved equity along with their partners, especially in terms of carrying out and distributing the household tasks. It is also important to observe that Orang Asli women realized and agreed that both men and women have the same responsibility in managing the household duties in their lives. It is also interesting to observe that apart from taking care of their family members, Orang Asli women also played another important role in their family, which is providing the early education at home for their children and passing down their traditional language to the younger generation. They speak and use the indigenous language with their children to teach and to ensure that their children know how to use the language. The claim of Orang Asli women hold major roles in the family is also supported by Yahaya and Yahaya (2014), where it was stated that Orang Asli women undoubtedly play major roles in their family and their responsibilities and obligations include managing the household, raising children, cooking meals for the family, and handling their kids' school-related issues. This aligns with the findings of the current study, which proves that Orang Asli women hold a significant position in their family, and they play major roles in managing household duties. Regarding the household duties management, the Orang Asli women made major contributions to fulfil their responsibilities towards their family. Based on the responses and feedback attained from the respondents, the Orang Asli women gained equality in sharing the household workload with their partner. This proves that Orang Asli women's efforts in managing the family are recognized and appreciated by their partners.

5.2 Theme 2: Providing Income for the Family

The results from the thematic analysis of this study also brought out the second emerged theme, which was providing for the family institutions. This theme demonstrated the respondents' feedback on whether the Orang Asli women play the role in providing the income for the family or not. According to the comments from the semi-structured interviews, the Temiar women were generally not involved in providing the income for the family. They relied on their husband to bring the income for the whole family. The responses obtained from the respondents also presented the types of occupations that allow their partner provide earnings for the family.

"My spouse works at the palm oil farm, while I stay at home". (Respondent 1 and 2, Temiar women)

"My spouse works as a rubber tapper, and I am a stay-at-home mother". (Respondent 3, Temiar woman)

"My husband is employed as a security guard and I am not working" (Respondent 4, Temiar woman)

The feedback provided from the respondents portrayed that only the men within the Temiar community hold the responsibility to provide for the family, whereas the women did not play any role in doing so. Interestingly, in Semai community however, the respondents shared that some women are involved in the entrepreneurship industry, where they engaged in the production and sale of handicrafts, as well as in introducing and promoting traditional treatments. Global Peace Foundation Malaysia (2018) presented that nowadays, Orang Asli women have shown their passion and perseverance in their pursuit to improve their lifestyle, through a variety of income-generating options, nevertheless, despite their passion and dedication, many of them still encounter

tough challenges like a lack of funding, resources, or knowledge. This shows that Orang Asli women have the to improve their lives and if they are given the opportunity and sufficient supports, they are capable to get employed and play their role in contributing to the financial and economic needs of their family. To give Orang Asli women a greater chance to better their own lives within their own power, more assistance and efforts must be made. In terms of their economical state, most of the Orang Asli women are still very much reliant on their husbands to provide for their family and play minor roles in contributing to their family's economic development. They also believed that the responsibilities to provide earnings and income for their family should be given to their husband as men hold the title as the breadwinners of the family.

5.3 Theme 3: Preservation of Culture and Beliefs

The indigenous community are normally associated with their own unique cultural practices and beliefs, which represents their identity. The indigenous people highly value and take pride in their culture and beliefs, and like other indigenous community across the globe, Orang Asli community also strive to protect their inherited, valuable culture, beliefs, and traditions. The thematic analysis conducted in this study also revealed the third emerging theme which was preservation of culture and beliefs. This theme elaborated on the cultural practices and beliefs that the Orang Asli community still practice. The responses obtained from the respondents illustrated that the Orang Asli women still hold their traditional culture close to their heart, and they highly value their culture. They also agreed that up until now, they still practice their traditional practices, and some of the respondents shared the cultural practices that is still existent in their community.

"We are not allowed to look into the mirror at night. We follow the traditions because we love our culture" (Respondent 1, Temiar women)

"We are not allowed to apply make-up during funeral and the following seven days after the funeral" (Respondent 2, Temiar woman)

"We will send our sick children to see the shaman. Additionally, make-up cannot be applied seven days following a funeral or during it. If we continue to wear make-up, we are breaking the taboo" (Respondent 3, Temiar woman)

"We follow the traditions. For example, it is forbidden for us to make noise during the Sewang " (Respondent 4, Temiar woman)

"It is our duty as Orang Asli women to teach and practice Sewang dance and handicrafts in order to preserve the cultural identity of the Orang Asli people". (Respondent 5, Semai woman)

It is clearly observed, from the feedback acquired during the semi-structured interviews with the participants, their inherited traditional practices are still deep rooted in the culture of Orang Asli community. The practice of taboo and shamanism are still occurring among their community, and out of love for their culture, they retain and preserve these traditions up until now. It is also amazing to discover that although they belong to different tribes, the practice and culture of *Sewang* dance exists in both Semai and Temiar community. The findings of this study presented on the richness of Orang Asli community's invaluable traditions and culture. Cultures and traditions are essential to all of us, and exposed to globalization and modernization, the beliefs, and traditions in danger of extinction.

5.4 Theme 4: Women Responsibilities in Family and Society

The thematic analysis on the collected data of this study also revealed the fourth and last emerged theme which is the responsibilities in family and society. In each domestic and societal institution, every individual possesses their own roles and responsibilities that they are required to fulfill. This theme portrayed the types of responsibilities that are believed to be fulfilled by certain genders, in this case the responsibilities that should be fulfilled by husband and wife. The responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews also presented the perceptions of Orang Asli women on the weight of the responsibilities entitled to men and women.

"I believe that women should stay at home to care for the family and handle household chores, and men should go to work". (Respondent 1, Temiar woman)

"Because men are stronger and more capable than women, I believe that men have greater responsibilities" (Respondent 2, Temiar woman)

“In my opinion, men should be expected to work harder because they have greater responsibilities”
(Respondent 3 and 4, Temiar women)

“Finding wood in the forest to use for cooking the wedding food is our responsibility as ladies. Women have to do it” (Respondent 5, Semai woman)

The responses attained from the respondents showed that Orang Asli women believed that men hold greater responsibilities than women, and therefore men should be the one who perform the outside work. They also agreed that they preferred to handle the household tasks and let the husband carry the responsibilities to provide for the family, as men are the breadwinners for the family. Among the many responses obtained, Respondent 5 shared interesting feedback, where it was stated that it is an obligation for Orang Asli women to gather the woods from the forest to be used during the wedding. The findings demonstrated that the women were dissatisfied with the tasks assigned to them during the ceremonies because they thought that men should perform the duties. All responses obtained from the respondents align with each other as it was discovered that the Orang Asli women believed that men should handle more tasks as they are entitled with greater responsibilities than women.

6. Conclusion

This study discovered that Orang Asli women play many important roles in the indigenous community. The presence of Orang Asli women is essential in their community as they made many contributions for the development of the indigenous community. This study revealed four major themes: managing household duties, providing income for the family institutions, preservation of culture and beliefs, and responsibilities in family and society. The finding presents a prospect for subsequent investigations aimed at devising tactics to motivate Orang Asli women to assume responsibility for enhancing the household duties, financial, cultural values, family, and society circumstances independently of their partners. It is hoped that in future years, indigenous women's mentalities would alter and become more positive. Therefore, we ought to seek out the chances to take all action necessary to guarantee that this community's traditional practices and cultural life receives the acknowledgments they deserved. Due to the distinct background, circumstances, methodologies, and subjects involved in this study, until further research in different contexts is conducted, it is not possible to generalise the previously mentioned findings of this study. However, the results and findings of this study are expected to be useful as references and inspiration for future study in exploring the contributions made by Orang Asli women for gender equality.

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