

Feminism and Gender Equality among Orang Asli Women: Implications for Customs and Laws

Rafidah Abd Karim¹, Ramlee Mustapha², Norwaliza Abdul Wahab, Mohd Hasrol Hafizz Aliasak⁴, Nurul Farhani Che Ghani⁵, Irwansyah⁶

^{1,5} Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch Tapah Campus, Malaysia. E-mail: feida16@uitm.edu.my

² Faculty of Technical and Vocational, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. E-mail: dr.ramlee@ftv.upsi.edu.my

³ Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. E-mail: norwaliza@fpm.upsi.edu.my

⁴ College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch Seri Iskandar Campus, Malaysia. E-mail: haffiz677@uitm.edu.my

⁶ Faculty of Law, Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia. E-mail: irwansyah@unhas.ac.id

Abstract: Although Malaysia has made progress in recognising Indigenous rights, the perspectives of Orang Asli women on feminism and gender equality remain largely absent from legal and academic discourse. This article examines the legal tensions between indigenous customary laws and Malaysia's constitutional commitment to gender equality, as perceived and experienced by Orang Asli women. The central legal issue explored is whether customary practices that reflect patriarchal norms can withstand constitutional scrutiny under Article 8 of the Federal Constitution, and how these practices align with Malaysia's obligations under CEDAW and UNDRIP. Using a doctrinal legal methodology, the study systematically examines constitutional provisions, relevant legislation, and judicial interpretations concerning indigenous law and gender rights. A socio-legal component complements this analysis through empirical data collected from 120 questionnaires and 30 semi-structured interviews with Orang Asli women from five selected tribes, providing context to how these legal norms function in practice. This article contributes to legal theory by engaging with legal pluralism and feminist legal thought, revealing how unregulated customary practices can undermine fundamental rights. Thus, it enhances legal studies by highlighting an ethical framework for legislative and judicial reconciliation between constitutional equality and indigenous legal traditions. In a pluralistic legal circumstance, this study advocates on Malaysian legal institutions to acknowledge the changing voices of Indigenous women as catalysts of change.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Indigenous Feminism; Orang Asli; Customs; Laws

1. Introduction

Among the diverse existent set of humanity across the globe, one of the communities that are worth exploring and often qualify as credible subjects of study among researchers are the Indigenous people community. Indigenous peoples are commonly associated as the people who comprise of various unique cultural practices, traditions, and beliefs, which often resulted to gain the interests among researchers.¹ Orang Asli is the common name for Peninsular Malaysia's Indigenous people, and it is constituted of

¹ Niigaaniin, Mamaweswen, and Timothy MacNeill. 2022. "Indigenous Culture and Nature Relatedness: Results from a Collaborative Study." *Environmental Development* 44 (September): 100753. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envdev.2022.100753>.

18 sub-ethnic groups. Three primary ethnic groups are used to separate them: the Proto-Malay, the Negrito, and the Senoi.²

Orang Asli communities are recognized under Article 8(5)(c)³ of the Malaysian Federal Constitution and governed by the Aboriginal Peoples Act of 1954 (APA 1954)⁴. In Malaysia, Orang Asli women are integral inhabitants of their communities, however they frequently encounter major obstacles as a result of a confluence of conventional gender roles, social marginalization, economic vulnerability, and the pressures of modernization.⁵ Traditional gender norms are still highly valued in many Orang Asli communities. Women are supposed to uphold social norms, take care of the house, and raise the children. In opposition, males are frequently viewed as the ones who make decisions or provide for the family.⁶ Although these responsibilities are essential to community life, they can also restrict women's freedom of movement, chances for personal development, and involvement in political, social, and economic spheres.⁷ The philosophy of feminism aims to provide men and women equal rights in political, social, and cultural groups.⁸ Still, feminism and gender equality present major complications for Orang Asli women. Achieving gender equality requires improving many facets of women's lives and that gender equality is a dual discourse. It encompasses women's political, economic, and educational engagement, among many other facets of society.⁹

Previous studies found that Orang Asli women encounter structural obstacles to feminist movements and gender equality because of a confluence of political, social, cultural, and historical issues.¹⁰ The United Nations created the SDG 5 measure to draw attention to the actions that may be made to enhance women's empowerment and to acknowledge the obstacles that women face around the world in their pursuit of gender

² Yap, Wai-Sum, Alvin Cengnata, Woei-Yuh Saw, Thuhairah Abdul Rahman, Yik-Ying Teo, Renee Lay-Hong Lim, and Boon-Peng Hoh. 2025. "High-Coverage Whole-Genome Sequencing of a Jakun Individual from the 'Orang Asli' Proto-Malay Subtribe from Peninsular Malaysia." *Human Genome Variation* 12 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41439-024-00308-6>.

³ "Article 153, Federal Constitution of Malaysia." 1957. <http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/const/1957/12.html>

⁴ "Aboriginal Peoples Act". 1954 (Act 134).

⁵ Suria Angit (Temiar, and Adrian Jarvis. 2024. "An Indigenous View of Social Justice Leadership in the Malaysian Education System." *Alternative* 20 (1): 215–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801241235422>.

⁶ Karim, Rafidah Abd, Azurawati Zaidi, Farhani Che, Syaza Kamarudin, and Wan Faridatul. 2023. "Jahai Voices of Malaysia: Exploring Indigenous Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development in the Royal Belum State Park." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 13 (4): 987–98. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i4/16093>.

⁷ Dahlum, Sirianne, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Valeriya Mechkova. 2022. "Women's Political Empowerment and Economic Growth." *World Development* 156 (August): 105822. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105822>.

⁸ Widya, Thesya, and Asnani Asnani. 2020. "RADICAL FEMINISM in EKA KURNIAWAN'S NOVEL BEAUTY IS a WOUND." *JOURNAL of LANGUAGE* 2 (1): 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.30743/jol.v2i1.2477>.

⁹ Rohlinger, D. A., Olsen, A., & Hewitt, L. (2020, July). "Dualing discourse: Democracy, gender equity and discursive politics in rural Morocco". In *Women's Studies International Forum* 81, (2020) : 102373). Pergamon.

¹⁰ "Indigenous Peoples, Gender, and Natural Resource Management from INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, GENDER, and NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT on JSTOR." 2025. *Jstor.com*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/resrep15621.5>.

equality.¹¹ Colonial legacies, patriarchal systems, restricted access to resources and education, gender-based violence, and marginalisation from mainstream feminist movements are the causes of their underrepresentation in these fields.¹²

Before British colonisation, the family and social structure and leadership system of the Orang Asli populations were unique and varied among different groups.¹³ Traditionally, Orang Asli women managed gathering, caring for children, and running the home, while males were the hunters and gatherers.¹⁴ But women also had important roles in rituals and decision-making, which reflected the power dynamics in families. Matrilineal descent, which traces ancestry and inheritance through the mother, was practiced by several Orang Asli families.¹⁵ Women had considerable influence over family decisions and resource management as a result, which influenced roles and obligations inside the home. Depending on their age, gender, and skill set, community members had distinct roles. While younger members were taught traditional skills and knowledge, elders were regarded for their expertise and functioned as advisors.¹⁶

Orang Asli women are often underrepresented in leadership roles within their communities, as well as in government and national decision-making bodies. They have been marginalised in the community because of this historical change, which has restricted their access to economic, political, and leadership roles.¹⁷ Typically, leadership was community-based and informal. Respected for their knowledge, expertise, and conflict-resolution skills, the Tok Batin (or Headman) was chosen. Although it might also be determined by merit, this position was frequently inherited.¹⁸ Orang Asli women are, nevertheless, increasingly standing up for gender equality, claiming their rights, and trying to bring about change in their communities despite these obstacles. Their voices

¹¹ Karim, R. A., Mustapha, R., & Zainol, N. S. (2022). Women Leadership in Higher Learning Institutions: Malaysia's Challenging Path to SDG 5. In the *DAKAM (Eastern Mediterranean Academic Research Center) Studies in Humanities Conference Proceedings Fall 2022*

¹² Fotaki, Marianna, and Alison Pullen. 2023. "Feminist Theories and Activist Practices in Organization Studies." *Organization Studies* 45 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231209861>.

¹³ Nah, Alice M. 2008. "Recognizing Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysian Law: Rights and Realities for the Orang Asli (Aborigines) of Peninsular Malaysia." *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 164 (2-3): 212–37. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003657>.

¹⁴ Padzil, R and Somiah, V. 2023. "'Leaderless' Resistance? An Anatomy of Female Leadership in Orang Asli Grassroots Movements." 2023. *Wacana: Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 24 (2). <https://doi.org/10.17510/wacana.v24i2.1166>.

¹⁵ Bisrat Teklesilassie Yazew. 2024. "Women's Contributions versus Men's Patriarchal Status among Afar Pastoralists in the Lower Awash Valley." *Heliyon* 10 (14): e34469–69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e34469>.

¹⁶ Hussain, Faridah, Kemala Alang, Nur Izzati Ariffin, and Marina Ismail. 2023. "Aboriginal Ethnic Group Commonly Known as Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: Re-Examining the Right to Take Forest Produce." *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 12 (3). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v12-i3/19035>.

¹⁷ Baharun, H. and Ismail, H. 2022. "Between Us and Them: Examining the Indigenous People of Malaysia as Represented in The Mainstream News Media". *Al-Azkiyaa - International Journal of Language and Education* 1 (1):22-34. <https://doi.org/10.33102/alazkiyaa.v1i1.6>.

¹⁸ Amat Simin, Mohamad Hafis, Ramle Abdullah, and Asmawi Ibrahim. 2015. "Influence of Local Leadership in Poverty Eradication among the Orang Asli Communities in the State of Terengganu, Malaysia." *Asian Social Science* 11 (21). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n21p342>.

are increasingly being heard in campaigns to preserve ancestral lands, recover indigenous knowledge, and advance an egalitarian and inclusive society.¹⁹

This study explores the perceptions of Orang Asli women from the five main tribes which are Mah Meri, Temiar, Jakun, Semai, and Jahai about feminism and gender equality, as well as the effects these concepts have on Indigenous customs and laws within Orang Asli communities. These five tribes, according to the Malaysia Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), are all part of the same Senoi ethnic group, make up 1.95 %, 18.3 %, and 28.66 % of the Orang Asli population overall.²⁰ The article first starts with the feminism and gender equality context and the customs and laws overview relating to Orang Asli communities. The process of gathering data and analysing that data for this study are then presented in the article. Ultimately, the findings were discussed, and the implications, recommendations and conclusions were presented in the final part of this article.

1.1. Indigenous Feminism and Gender Equality

Indigenous feminism and gender equality are concepts that emphasise the relationship between gender and indigenous identity with the goal of addressing the difficulties and experiences that gender-diverse individuals and indigenous women encounter in both their local communities and society broadly. Both ideas challenge colonial history, patriarchy, and social structures that have suppressed aboriginal peoples and their lifestyle to advance equality, justice, and women's and other gender minorities' empowerment. The rich and intricate history of Orang Asli villages is intricately entwined with the local customs and culture. Throughout history, they have encountered several difficulties, including the encroachment of modernization, deforestation, and the erosion of traditional customs. However, efforts are being made to address the occurring issues among them and to promote the privileges in their community.

In the context of Orang Asli women, they have been determined in their support of increasing women's representation of their identity and presence in Malaysian culture. Being a minority population in Malaysia, they frequently experience issues that negatively affect their well-being, such as access to health care, political and social marginalization, diminished livelihoods, encroachment on ancestral territory, and differences in economic and educational opportunities. While fighting for their rights, Orang Asli women face numerous levels of difficulties, many of which are intertwined with their identities as Indigenous women and people. Feminism and gender equality within Orang Asli are also important issues that should be addressed as it is crucial for achieving true social justice

¹⁹ The Status Of Women's Rights In Malaysia." n.d. <https://www.suhakam.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/SUHAKAM-Report-on-The-Status-of-Women-s-Rights-in-Malaysia-2010.pdf>.

²⁰ "Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA)". Jadual Taburan Etnik Orang Asli Mengikut Negeri. (2023) <https://www.jakoa.gov.my/>

and empowerment. It is important to recognise that Indigenous women in our culture frequently experience a variety of obstacles and prejudice, such as limited access to economic opportunities, healthcare, and education.²¹ Transnational Feminism Theory emphasizes the need for a transnational approach to feminism that considers the complex networks of power and the diverse experiences of women across different cultures, economies, and political landscapes.²²

The theory opposes against a universalizing approach to feminism that generalizes that all women globally share the same oppression or discrimination experiences. Feminist theory covers a broad spectrum of ideas that illuminate the diverse realities of women around the world. Feminism challenges traditional thinking by promoting alternative approaches to human problems and the replacement of the existing patriarchal system with one that prioritises equality, justice, and fairness.²³ The feminist theory is strongly related to and has deep roots in the philosophy of gender equality and it highlights that gender equality is necessary for a prosperous, peaceful, and sustainable world in addition to being a fundamental human right. The underlying theory of gender equality put forth to emphasise the right of all women to be free from discrimination, violence, and oppression and it focuses on the empowerment of women as a fundamental human right.²⁴

The term gender equality describes how all individuals despite their gender should be treated equally and attain equal treatment, rights, and opportunities and that one's rights, responsibilities, and opportunities should not be determined by their gender at birth.²⁵ The results showed that the Jahai tribe women's perceived gender equality and feminism which had a big impact on how these ideas were developed inside their Indigenous community.²⁶

1.2. Orang Asli: The Customs and Laws

Orang Asli communities had autonomy and sovereignty over their own areas, as well as customs and traditions that ruled their own concerns, and they were distinct from the

²¹ Dong, M. M., Midmore, P. and Plotnikova, M. 2022. "Understanding the experiences of Indigenous minorities through the lens of spatial justice: The case of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia." *Regional Science Policy & Practice* 14 (5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12512>.

²² Grewal, Inderpal. 2006. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. Of Minnesota Press.

²³ Tong, Rosemarie. 2022. "Towards a Feminist Global Ethics." *Global Bioethics* 33 (1): 14–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11287462.2021.2011002>.

²⁴ "UN Women". Commission on the Status of Women. (2020). accessed February 2 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>

²⁵ Smith, Sonya G., and Jeanne C. Sinkford. 2022. "Gender Equality in the 21st Century: Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership in Global Health." *Journal of Dental Education* 86 (9): 1144–73.

²⁶ Karim, R.A., Mustapha, R., Wahab, N.A., Aliasak, M.H.H., Ghani, N.F.C. & Zainol. N. Z. "Gender Equality and Feminism in Indigenous Society: A Case of Jahai Women in Malaysia". In *The 7th International Conference on Gender Research* 7 no. 1 (2024).

Malays.²⁷ Customs, beliefs, rituals, and behaviours that have been passed down through the generations within a group are referred to as customs by indigenous people. An indigenous group's identity, culture, and way of life are fundamentally shaped by these customs. They reflect the social structures, values, and environmental interactions that have been established over many years. The main groups of Orang Asli have its own customs and traditions, but there are some common aspects that unify their cultures. Among of the Orang Asli's traditions include music and dancing, festivals and ceremonies, hunting and gathering, and spiritual beliefs.

The majority of Orang Asli groups practise animism, which holds that animals, plants, mountains, and rivers are all home to spirits. These spirits must be respected, and ceremonies are often held to honour them. Customary law is the most important social structure in the community for safeguarding resources in a traditional forest region against exploitation by both the community and outside parties.²⁸ Traditionally, the Orang Asli are hunter-gatherers, depending on the forest for food and they use tools such as blowpipes (used by the Negrito) and bows and arrows for hunting, as well as traps for catching small animals. To ensure a successful hunt and to show appreciation for the natural resources, hunting frequently involves rituals and offerings to the spirits. Temiar tribe's livelihood depends on gathering products from the forests as well as through animal hunting while the main sources of livelihood of the Semai people are by hunting and farming.²⁹

The Tasik Chini region, which is home to Malaysia's second-largest inland lake, is home to the Jakun people, who rely on the lake and forest for their primary sources of income. They fish, hunt, and gather forest goods there.³⁰ On the other hand, the Jahai people are discovered to live around and within the Royal Belum State Park. They are mostly hunter-gatherers, with fishing and hunting serving as their primary sources of income.³¹ In some Orang Asli communities, there are festivals to celebrate the harvest. These are communal events that may involve dancing, singing, feasting, and offerings to the spirits for a bountiful crop. Some groups hold ceremonies to appease or communicate with spirits.

²⁷ Wook, Izawati. 2015. "The Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 And The Recognition Of Orang Asli Land Rights." UUM Journal of Legal Studies, December. <https://doi.org/10.32890/uujls.6.2015.4587>.

²⁸ Patittingi, Farida. 2020. "New Paradigm in Natural Resources Management: Securing Indigenous Peoples Rights." Hasanuddin Law Review 6 (1): 56. <https://doi.org/10.20956/halrev.v6i1.2267>.

²⁹ Baharom, Nor Azmi, and Pakhriazad Hassan Zaki. 2020. "Socioeconomic Temiar Community in RPS Kemar, Hulu Perak." IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science 596 (December): 012072. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/596/1/012072>.

³⁰ Parker, Jonathan, Sara Ashencaen Crabtree, M Crabtree Parker, and I Crabtree Parker. 2019. "'Behaving like a Jakun!' a Case Study of Conflict, 'Othering' and Indigenous Knowledge in the Orang Asli of Tasik Chini," September.

³¹ Loke, Vivienne P. W., Teckwyn Lim, and Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz. 2020. "Hunting Practices of the Jahai Indigenous Community in Northern Peninsular Malaysia." Global Ecology and Conservation 21 (March): e00815. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2019.e00815>.

For example, the Senoi have a tradition of performing rituals during the full moon or at specific times of the year, in line with their agricultural cycles. Dance is also an important part of Orang Asli culture, particularly during ceremonies. These dances are often meant to express gratitude, seek blessings, or connect with the spiritual world. Their strong ties to their territory and way of life are reflected in these practices. However, modernisation and outside forces are putting many of these customs in jeopardy. Despite ongoing difficulties, efforts are being made to maintain their culture and customs.

In Malaysia, several laws and policies have been enacted for their communities specifically to address the rights, welfare, and protection. Although there has frequently been disagreement on the efficacy of these rules and how they should be applied, they are intended to protect their welfare, land, and culture. The laws connected to Orang Asli communities are the Article 8(5)(c) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution and Aboriginal Peoples Act of 1954 (APA 1954). The Malaysian Federal Constitution acknowledges the rights of Orang Asli, and provides for their welfare and advancement, particularly through Article 8(5)(c)³² and Article 153, while also recognizing their customary land rights. Article 8(5)(c) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution permits clauses such as land reservations and reserved posts in the public sector that safeguard, enhance, or improve the welfare of Peninsular Malaysia's indigenous populations.

Clarifying Orang Asli's legal status as unique Indigenous peoples could be a starting step in resolving these difficulties with contextualised rights that do not affect the privileges presently enjoyed by Malays under the Malaysian Constitution.³³ To gain the support from this group, the British established the department in 1950 under the name Department of Aborigines. In 1954, the government enlarged the department, which was mainly in charge of employing Orang Asli to support the government's fight against the communists and the department. Today, the former department is known as the Orang Asli Development Agency (JAKOA), was granted jurisdiction over all things pertaining to Orang Asli by the Aboriginal Peoples Act of 1954.³⁴

The protection, welfare, and advancement of Peninsular Malaysia's indigenous population are the goals of the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (Act 134).³⁵ Specifically, characteristics including language, customs, beliefs, and way of life, as well as blood links or lineage to the aborigines, are used under the Aboriginal Peoples Act of 1954 to define the indigenous peoples. This group is defined as a specific tribal division of aborigines that is distinguished by culture, language, or social organisation. They are divided into tribes based on social organisation, language, or culture and it may also include any group that

³² "Federal Constitution (Malaysia) art 8(5)(c)", 1957. <http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/const/1957/12.html>

³³ Subramaniam, Yogeswaran. 2015. "Ethnicity, Indigeneity and Indigenous Rights: The 'Orang Asli' Experience." *QUT Law Review* 15 (1). <https://doi.org/10.5204/qutlr.v15i1.562>.

³⁴ Asian Indigenous & Tribal Peoples Network (2008). *The Department of Orang Asli Affairs, Malaysia—an agency for assimilation*. New Delhi: Asian Indigenous & Tribal Peoples Network.

³⁵ Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (Act 134).

the state has formally recognised as such. This study explored Orang Asli women's perspectives of feminism concept and gender equality practices in Malaysia. The research goals of the study were as follows:

- a. To examine Orang Asli women's perceptions of feminism concepts in the Indigenous community
- b. To examine Orang Asli women's perceptions of gender equality practices in the Indigenous community
- c. To explore the implications of feminism concepts and gender equality practices on Indigenous customs and laws

2. Method

This study uses feminism and gender equality perspectives as the theoretical underpinnings that focuses on Orang Asli women. We employed a combination of doctrinal legal analysis with a socio-legal empirical component to examine indigenous law and gender rights among Orang Asli women in Malaysia. The doctrinal legal methodology involves systematic analysis of primary legal sources, including constitutional provisions, statutory laws such as the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and a universal framework including United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). To complement the legal analysis, a socio-legal component was integrated to explore how these legal provisions operate in practice within Indigenous communities.

Empirical data were collected through 120 structured questionnaires and 30 semi-structured interviews with Orang Asli women from five selected tribes and they resided in different settlement areas of Orang Asli in Malaysia's Peninsula: (1) Jahai in Royal Belum State Park, (2) Mah Meri in Pulau Carey, (3) Jakun in Tasik Chini, (4) Temiar in Kuala Betis and (5) Semai in Tapah. The questionnaires assessed legal awareness, gender roles, and access to justice, while the interviews provided deeper insights into personal experiences with both formal law and customary practices. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diverse representation across age, marital status, and tribal background. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were thematically coded to identify recurring patterns and perspectives. All ethical guidelines were strictly followed, with informed consent obtained from participants and cultural sensitivity maintained throughout the research process.

2.1. Orang Asli Women and Data Collection

The stratified random sampling was used for collecting data from Orang Asli women's inquiry form. Based on each tribe: (1) Jahai (30 women), (2) Mah Meri (30 women), (3) Jakun (20 women), (4) Temiar (30 women) and (5) Semai (10 women). 120 Orang Asli

women were chosen at random to complete the surveys. The snowballing sampling technique were employed for collecting the qualitative data to explore Orang Asli women feministic values and gender equality characteristics. Only 30 women were selected from all the tribes that suggested by Tok Batin (Headman) for the semi-structured interviews. Several participants had difficulties in answering the questionnaires and interviews due to language barriers, so the women were facilitated by the guide and researchers conducted bilingually.

2.2. Data Analysis

In this study, data was analysed using SPSS version 28, a quantitative data analysis program. The participants' audio recordings were faithfully transcribed. The participants' audio recordings were accurately transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to examine the information gathered from semi-structured interviews. The coding and theme creation process was aided by Atlas.ti version 8. The transcripts were transcribed and identified the key terms and coded using the software. The research team discussed and finalised the coded data and key terms for the qualitative findings.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the study's questionnaire and semi-structured interview data is presented in this part. The findings were classified into four aspects of the study: (1) The demographic characteristics of women from Orang Asli (3) gender equality practices, (2) feminism concepts, and (4) thematic analysis.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Orang Asli Women

Only 30 Orang Asli women were chosen for the semi-structured interviews out of a total of 120 Orang Asli women from five tribes (Jahai, Mah Meri, Jakun, Temiar, and Semai). Most participants aged between 20-29 years (31.7%). Most of the participants (95%) were married and they mostly had 1-3 children (60%). Concerning the degree of education, most of women (36.7%) had only attended the primary school. The analysis showed that most of Orang Asli women (51.7%) inhabited in the Indigenous community since they were born. Most of the participants (64.2%) do not work whereas their spouse is mostly employed (78.3%). The analysis also showed that the highest allowance (40.8%) the women received from their spouse is RM 100 – RM 290. With regards to the position in the tribe's community, most of Orang Asli women (88.3%) are without any positions. As shown in Table 1, a demographic overview is presented for this article (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of Orang Asli women of Malaysia (n=120).

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Tribe	30	25
Jahai	30	25
Mah Meri	20	16.7
Jakun	30	20.5
Temiar	30	20.5
Semai	10	8.3
Age		
19 years and below	1	0.8
20-29 years	38	31.7
30-39	1	0.8
40-49	30	25.0
50 and above	14	11.7
Status of Marriage		
Married	114	95.0
Not married	4	3.3
Widow	0	0
Divorcee	2	1.7
Children		
None	0	0
1-3	72	60
4- 6	33	27.5
7-9	9	7.5
10 and above	2	1.7
Education Level		
Higher Institution	4	3.3
Secondary School	41	34.2
Primary School	44	36.7
Not schooling	31	25.8
Duration of residency in Indigenous community		
Since born	62	51.7
1-15 years	11	9.2
16- 25 years	11	9.2
26- 45 years	26	21.7
46 years and above	10	8.3
Have you got a job?		
Yes	43	35.8
No	77	64.2
Is your spouse employed?		
Yes	94	78.3
No	26	21.7
Do you hold any position in the tribe's community?		
Yes	14	11.7
No	106	88.3

Five groups were established from the mean values for the quantitative findings: highly disagree (1.00-1.80), disagree (1.81-2.60), agree (3.41-4.20), disagree (2.61-3.40), and strongly agree (4.21-5.00). Then, the results of the three highest means and the three lowest mean values of the items were illustrated.

The analysis in Table 2 shows the feminism concepts perceived by participants of the study. The analysis was categorized into seven aspects: (1) customs and culture, (2) economical aspects, (3) education, (4) personality attributes, (5) leadership, (6) the right to freedom and (7) law and human rights. From the findings, the three highest means illustrated that most of Orang Asli women were strongly agreed with item 18, item 21 and item 22. Based on education aspect, they strongly believed that ($M=4.87$; $SD=0.33$) they can find employment with ease, if they are educated (item 18). This perception aligns with Article 8(1) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection, including in the realm of employment and education. In the context of psychological attributes, most of the participants greatly agreed ($M=4.83$; $SD=0.37$) that they use their tribe's language to communicate every day within the family and community (item 21). Next, they also expressed clearly ($M=4.83$; $SD=0.38$) that living with the Orang Asli community makes them pleasant (item 22). Because of the community's continued ties to their land, the wise use of resources may be guaranteed. Moreover, their life in the forest can be understood as small perturbations that the ecosystem of the forest needs to endure to remain resilient. Thus, they enjoy living in the forest within their community.³⁶

The analysis also showed the three lowest mean values. The first lowest mean value revealed that the participants strongly opposed ($M=2.13$; $SD=0.90$) that they let their children do whatever they like (item 2). These findings (item 2 and item 3) are related to tradition and value aspects which showed that the Orang Asli women will take care and guide their children well especially in preserving their traditions and beliefs. Like other Indigenous peoples, Orang Asli put a lot of effort into preserving their distinct identity and culture, which are connected by social, cultural, economic, and physical ties. From a legal perspective, this cultural role is supported by Article 5 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their distinct cultural institutions and traditions. Additionally, Article 13 of UNDRIP emphasizes the right to transmit culture, language, and identity to future generations. Knowledge of the Orang Asli offers important insights into social structures, spirituality, and nature, all of which are essential

³⁶ Diansyah, Mohammad Wahyu, Azlan Abas, and Zaini Sakawi. 2022. "Exploring the Relevance of Engaging the Orang Asli in Malaysia's Forest Management." *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change* 5 (November). <https://doi.org/10.3389/ffgc.2022.1019994>.

for preserving their cultural heritage.³⁷ Likewise, they also were uncertain ($M=2.71$; $SD=1.12$) that they would never hit their children (item 3). They also expressed doubt about their freedom to go to work and make money without their husband's consent in item 33 ($M=2.72$; $SD=1.43$).

Table 2. The feminism concepts as represented by Orang Asli women in Malaysia.

Item	Statement	M	SD	Interpretation
Customs and Culture				
1	I educate my children about the Orang Asli culture more than my husband	4.06	1.25	Agree
2	I let my children do whatever they like	2.13	0.90	Strongly disagree
3	I never hit my children	2.71	1.12	Uncertain
4	I know how to do Sewang	3.85	1.31	Agree
5	I help other women in my village	4.22	0.70	Strongly agree
6	I help in treating sick villagers	4.06	0.91	Agree
7	I use leaves and trees as ingredients to treat diseases	3.44	1.49	Agree
8	I am skilled in making handicraft like weaving to protect the tradition of tribe in this community	3.02	1.51	Uncertain
Economical Aspects				
9	I think Orang Asli women should work to help the family's economy	4.11	0.82	Agree
10	I think Orang Asli women should be given the same job opportunity as Orang Asli men	3.63	1.20	Agree
11	I think Orang Asli women should have the skills to produce something to sell	4.15	0.81	Agree
12	I asked my children to go to school so they can get better job opportunities than me	3.53	1.52	Agree
Education				
13	During teenagers, I was given the same chances to learn at school like Orang Asli teenage boys	4.14	0.99	Agree
14	I was active in co-curricular activities while studying at school	3.95	1.12	Agree
15	I encourage women in this village to learn new skills	3.36	1.37	Uncertain
16	I can read in Bahasa Melayu (Malay language)	2.99	3.83	Uncertain
17	Many women from my community in this village go to school to study	4.48	0.84	Strongly agree
18	I believe I can easily get a job if I am educated	4.87	0.33	Strongly agree
Personality Attributes				
19	I enjoy doing house chores to help my family	4.39	1.10	Agree
20	I love the community, traditions, and language of Orang Asli	4.82	0.39	Strongly agree
21	I have everyday conversations in my tribe's language.	4.83	0.37	Strongly agree
22	I am happy to live among the Orang Asli community	4.83	0.38	Strongly agree
23	I love my family	4.06	1.10	Agree
24	I enjoy living together with the Orang Asli community	4.45	0.70	Strongly agree
25	I educate my children to be open minded	4.27	0.82	Strongly agree
Leadership				
26	Women can hold leadership position in my community	3.58	1.30	Agree
27	In my community, I can handle communal issues	3.60	1.27	Agree

³⁷ Shaari, J., Zulkifli, N.B. I., Abu. R., Ibrahim, C.W.I R.C.W., Razab & N.A, Embong, A.M. Orang Asli Knowledge – The Wisdom Inheritance of Indigenous Peoples., *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30 no. 5 (2024) : 11952-11966

28	I can express my opinions during any cultural ceremony	3.35	1.22	Agree
29	I assist Tok Batin in resolving community issues	2.96	1.26	Uncertain
The Right to Freedom				
30	Without my husband's consent, I am free to travel wherever I like	3.23	1.47	Uncertain
31	Without my husband's consent, I am free to express my opinions on any topic	3.68	1.22	Agree
32	I think other individuals can accept my thoughts and perspectives.	3.53	0.90	Agree
33	I can go to work and make money without my husband's consent	2.72	1.43	Uncertain
34	In my community, I feel secure	4.36	1.08	Strongly agree
Law and Human Rights				
35	As an Orang Asli woman, I am aware of my rights	3.86	1.11	Agree
36	I know that I have the same rights as men	3.68	1.36	Agree
37	I am aware that Orang Asli women and men have been treated equally for a very long time.	4.09	0.76	Strongly agree
38	I know that I am not supposed to get beaten	4.43	0.50	Strongly agree
39	I receive all I desire in life	3.32	1.08	Uncertain
Total average		3.91	3.60	Agree

Table 3 represents the analysis of the participants' perspectives of gender equality practices. The results showed the mean values based on four aspects: (1) education, (2) fundamental justice and legality, (3) discrimination and stereotype and (4) cultural and beliefs. Based on the analysis, the three highest mean values and three lowest mean values as shown in the table. All the three highest mean values were indicated relating to discrimination and stereotype aspect. First, the participants strongly agreed that ($M=4.66$; $SD=0.48$) the government provides more help to Orang Asli men than Orang Asli women (item 54).

Next, the participants also convincingly believed ($M=4.62$; $SD=0.49$) that they face more hardships to get employed than people from other races (item 53). Disparities in race, culture, and customs should not influence economic hardship. This perception reflects a persistent sense of marginalization and perceived inequality in access to economic opportunities. Such disparities, rooted in race, culture, and customary identity, highlight broader structural challenges that Orang Asli women experience in navigating mainstream in economic systems.

From a legal standpoint, these findings raise concerns regarding the right to equality and non-discrimination as enshrined in Article 8(1) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection regardless of race. In addition, CEDAW Article 11 obligates state parties to eliminate discrimination against women in employment, including access to the labour market and conditions of work, with particular attention to marginalized groups such as Indigenous women. The existing entities foster a culture of reliance on welfare handouts and special privileges, reinforcing the idea that the Orang Asli are inferior and backward, notwithstanding the good

intentions behind the central government's traditional development objectives.³⁸ The third highest mean value revealed that the participants strongly agreed ($M= 4.60$; $SD=0.51$) that as a woman, they are simply accountable for doing house chores (item 55).

Table 3. Gender equality practices as represented by Orang Asli women in Malaysia.

Item	Statement	M	SD	Interpretation
Education				
40	I think Orang Asli women also need to go to school like Orang Asli men	3.97	1.01	Agree
41	I think teachers at school need to treat Orang Asli well	3.72	1.26	Agree
42	I think schools need to provide excellent teaching facilities for Orang Asli	4.32	0.76	Strongly agree
43	I think learning in school should attract the interests of Orang Asli	4.44	0.71	Strongly agree
44	I believe that both Orang Asli boys and girls should go to school to study	3.88	1.21	Agree
45	I believe more Orang Asli women should be trained to become teachers at school	3.98	1.07	Agree
Fundamental Justice and Legality				
46	I know my rights as a woman on what others can or cannot do to me	3.31	1.36	Uncertain
47	I get the same aid from government as my husband	3.82	1.15	Agree
48	In my opinion, Orang Asli women receive the same treatment as Orang Asli men	3.00	1.40	Uncertain
49	I know my dad or husband cannot strike me	3.03	1.32	Uncertain
50	I know I can do and say anything I like	4.48	0.85	Strongly agree
51	I know the government can ensure my safety	4.55	0.71	Strongly agree
Discrimination and Stereotype				
52	I think other races denigrate Orang Asli women	4.58	0.60	Strongly agree
53	I think that I face more hardships to get employed than people from other races	4.62	0.49	Strongly agree
54	The government provides more help to Orang Asli men than Orang Asli women	4.66	0.48	Strongly agree
55	Doing house chores is the sole responsibility of women	4.60	0.51	Strongly agree
Cultural and Beliefs				
56	I engage in this Indigenous culture more often than men do	3.32	1.24	Uncertain
57	Women acquired and performed Sewang dance	3.48	1.27	Agree
58	Women uphold the traditional values more than men	3.50	1.28	Agree
59	Women value the tribe's customs more than men	3.30	1.29	Uncertain
60	Compared to men, women speak the native language more frequently	3.07	1.24	Uncertain
61	Unlike men, I protect the Indigenous culture	3.38	1.17	Uncertain
Total average		3.86	0.50	Agree

The Orang Asli continues to be stereotyped and denigrated and they are ideologically portrayed in mainstream and alternative media, as seen by the transitivity patterns that

³⁸ Masron, T., Masami, F., & Ismail, N. "Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: population, spatial distribution and socio-economic condition". *Journal of Ritsumeikan Social Sciences Humanities* 6 (2013): 75-115.

emerged from the evaluation.³⁹ The findings for the first lowest mean value was item 47. Participants were unsure ($M=3.00$; $SD=1.40$) if Orang Asli women and men receive the same treatment. Similarly, responses to item 48 ($M= 3.03$; $SD=1.32$) showed that many participants were uncertain about their legal rights regarding protection from domestic violence, specifically whether a father or husband is legally prohibited from striking them. These two findings were described relating to fundamental justice and legality aspect.

Under Malaysian law, Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution prohibits gender-based discrimination, and Malaysia's obligations under CEDAW require the state to protect women from all forms of violence and ensure access to justice. With regards to cultural and beliefs aspect, Orang Asli women also were uncertain that ($M= 3.07$; $SD=1.24$) they speak the native language more frequently compared to men (item 59).

From the interview data analysis, four main themes emerged: (1) Domestic tasks and community contribution (2) work for a living, (3) the right to freedom, and (4) gender equality and prospects. The results of the analysis are discussed in this section.

3.2 Domestic Tasks and Community Contribution

Several nations struggle with the socioeconomic issue of gendered family labour division. On the other hand, the research on this topic in Malaysia, specifically in the Indigenous people setting is limited. The distribution of domestic work among men and women in Malaysia is not equal.⁴⁰ Relating to the first theme, Orang Asli women shared about their domestic tasks they do every day and what they contributed to their tribe's community. The women from Jahai and Mah Meri tribes expressed that they did house chores at home. Besides, they helped the community during the cleanliness campaign and the feast day.

I do the house chores at home...I also help Tok Batin (Headman) sometimes during the cleanliness campaign. (Participant 7, Jahai tribe, 50 years old)

At home, women tend to the family and handle household tasks. In the village women help during the feast and celebration day. (Participant 20, Mah Meri tribe, 41 years old)

The participants from Temiar and Semai tribes noted that they did their routine at home, but they did not have any task to contribute for their community.

³⁹ KA CHUN, WONG, and MARLINA JAMAL. 2023. "Intertextual Representation of the Orang Asli in the Malaysian Online News Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis." *International Journal of Language, Literacy and Translation* 6 (2): 242–57. <https://doi.org/10.36777/ijolt2023.6.2.090>.

⁴⁰ Boo, Harn Shian. 2020. "Familial Influences on the Division of Household Labour in Malaysian Families." *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 16 (3). <https://doi.org/10.17576/geo-2020-1603-01>.

In my family, I do the tasks at home, doing house chores and take care of my family...in my community, I do not have any task. (Participant 40, Temiar tribe, 42 years old)

I do the laundry, I cook and take care of my children at home. In the community, I do not have no tasks. (Participant 45, Semai tribe, 41 years old)

However, one of the women shared that she only went to work from morning to evening at the plantation and she did not do any house chores.

In the morning, I will go to work at rubber plantation, in the evening I also work at the farm. (Participant 37, Jakun tribe, 38 years old)

3.3 Work for a Living

Like non-Indigenous people in Malaysia, Orang Asli community also makes a living to support their daily life. The Orang Asli people of today find themselves trapped between their traditional way of life and the modern world.. They represent less than 0.5% of the entire population of Malaysia, and about 75 percent of them are impoverished. From the analysis, this theme explored what Orang Asli women, and their spouse do to support their living in the Indigenous community. Several women do not work and some of them go to work for a living. The women from Jahai tribe and Mah Meri tribe are a housewife, but their spouses work for a living.

From a legal perspective, these findings raise concerns related to economic rights and gender equality. Article 8(1) of the Federal Constitution guarantees equality before the law, and Article 11 of CEDAW, to which Malaysia is a party, obligates the state to ensure equal access to employment and eliminate discrimination in the workplace. Yet, the lived reality of Orang Asli women suggests structural and cultural barriers remain unaddressed. Furthermore, the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, while providing certain recognitions to Indigenous communities, lacks provisions that support economic empowerment or employment rights particularly for women.

My husband is a fisherman...I am a housewife. (Participant 9, Jahai tribe, 39 years old)

No, I'm not employed...I am not working but my husband is an architectural assistant and he has a monthly income (Participant 18, Mah Meri tribe, 50 years old)

Participant 19 from Mah Meri tribe said that she owns a small business, and her husband works in the government sector. Likewise, participant 27 and her husband from Jakun tribe both work to support their income.

My husband works and has a permanent job as a government officer. I am a small business owner in this village (Participant 19, Mah Meri tribe, 35 years old)

Yes, we both work rubber tappers and farmers. (Participant 27, Jakun, 38 years old)

The analysis also discovered that several Orang Asli women go to work, but their husband do not work to support for living.

I work at the Orang Asli district...my husband does not work but I think it is crucial for women to work as well as to help family. (Participant 37, Temiar, 25 years old)

No, my husband does not work...only I work as a cleaner. (Participant 42, Semai, 43 years old)

3.4 The Right to Freedom

Since indigenous peoples are unique, they have the united right to live in freedom, peace, and security. The UNDRIP states that they also have the right to be free from violent acts such as ethnic cleansing and the taking of their children and their replacement by people from a different tribe.⁴¹ Several Orang Asli women described what are their rights and opportunities in their community. These perspectives align with fundamental rights protected under Article 10(1) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which guarantees freedom of speech, and Article 12, which ensures the right to education. Additionally, international human rights instruments such as the CEDAW reinforce these freedoms, emphasising the need for equal access regardless of ethnicity or gender. The participants from Jahai, Mah Meri and Jakun tribes had comparable opinions about the freedom of speech and education in connection with the right to freedom.

The government support women to go to school. If I so choose, I can express my viewpoint. (Participant 8, Jahai tribe, 36 years old)

For me, the government provided many education opportunities...they bring in the tourists and education to this village. As the community of this village, many outsiders such as university and colleges students come to this village and ask the villager's opinions regarding their feelings, health, education and so on...so I do share my opinions with them (Participant 17, Mah Meri, 28 years old)

⁴¹ OHCHR. (2013). UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, HR/PUB/13/2, August 2013.

I think the government give the same opportunity for men and women to go to school. Men and women are considered equally in terms of who is permitted to attend school. We can go to school both women and men...I am given a lot of opportunities to speak my opinions. (Participant 30, Jakun, 47 years old)

Participant 38 commented that she does not get the opportunity to voice her opinion in the community.

We can go to school. No... I do not get the opportunity to voice out my opinion. I think it is necessary for women to voice out their opinion so that we can help each other. (Participant 38, Temiar, 43 years old)

Unquestionably, the government has been putting a lot of effort into integrating the Orang Asli into mainstream education, and their progress has been evident. The current educational system has created many educated and successful Orang Asli.⁴² Therefore, it has shown that Orang Asli men and women had equal rights to receive an education in schools.

3.5 Gender Equality and Prospects

Gender equality was an issue that concerned not only to non-Indigenous people but also among Orang Asli community in Malaysia. Participant 19 from Mah Meri tribe commented that Orang Asli women and men have equal responsibilities and women can become a leader in the community. Participant 27 from Jakun tribe also expressed a similar comment. This perspective reflects a progressive understanding of gender roles and highlights the emerging recognition of women's leadership potential in certain Indigenous communities.

From a legal and human rights standpoint, this aligns with Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution, which prohibits gender discrimination, as well as CEDAW Article 7, which calls for the elimination of discrimination in political and public life, including the right of women to hold public office and participate in community leadership. It also resonates with UNDRIP Article 22, which emphasizes the need to ensure Indigenous women and children enjoy full protection and guarantees against discrimination.

As a woman in this community, I see no distinction between men and women of Orang Asli descent. No party holds the bigger responsibilities than the other. In this village, there are opportunities for women to become leaders. (Participant 19, Mah Meri tribe, 35 years old)

⁴² Nordin, Rohaida, Muhamad Sayuti Hassan@Yahya, Vatchira Wong Rui Fern, Melissa Cherley, and Lavernya Bala Subramaniam. 2020. "INDIGENOUS EDUCATION for the ORANG ASLI: LEGAL PERSPECTIVES and BEST PRACTICES." *Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS)* 5 (2): 365–83. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol5iss2pp365-383>.

I think we have the same responsibilities... in the community context, men sometime will focus more on working and earning money and women have more time so they will help more in the community. I think women could become leaders. (Participant 27, Jakun tribe, 31 years old)

The participants from Jahai, Temiar and Semai tribes both agreed that men have more responsibilities than women. They also expressed that women do not have the opportunity to be a leader in Orang Asli community.

Women do not have bigger responsibilities than men. Women cannot become leaders in this village. (Participant 10, Jahai tribe, 31 years old)

Men have bigger responsibilities than women. Only men can become leaders...women do not get the opportunity to become leader. (Participant 36, Temiar tribe, 23 years old)

Men have bigger responsibilities because they are the head of the family. No... there are no women leaders. There are no opportunities for women to become leaders. (Participant 42, Semai tribe, 43 years old)

Numerous studies over the years have also shown how women leaders improve teamwork, production, organisational commitment, and fairness. The study's findings contradict the statements made by several participants. Transformational leadership techniques are more frequently employed by female leaders. Giving more women leadership roles benefits everyone.⁴³ This response demonstrates how several Orang Asli communities are challenging traditional gender norms and embracing more inclusive roles for women, particularly in decision-making and leadership within their own cultural context.

4. Implications

The implications of feminist concepts and gender equality practices on Orang Asli customs and laws are deeply intertwined with the broader discussion on the relationship between Indigenous cultural traditions and external frameworks of gender equality. The Orang Asli has distinctively rich cultural roots. Their customs and legal practices may intersect with or be challenged by feminist and gender equality principles. There are several main considerations for the implications of the study that may have an impact on customs and laws in the Orang Asli community, which are as follows:

⁴³ Eagly, Alice H., Mona G. Makhijani, and Bruce G. Klonsky. 1992. "Gender and the Evaluation of Leaders: A Meta-Analysis." *Psychological Bulletin* 111 (1): 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.111.1.3>.

1. Gender Roles in Orang Asli communities

Gender roles have historically differed among the several groups that make up the Orang Asli authority, comprising the Semai, Temiar, and Jakun tribes. Nonetheless, many Indigenous communities still exhibit gendered division of labour and patriarchal aspects, with men frequently holding greater authority in domains like politics, leadership, and external interactions. Thus, feminist concepts may advocate for greater gender equality in areas where males have historically held authority by encouraging a reevaluation of established gender roles. Additionally, positions that are not as rigidly defined by Western gender binary systems may be recognised, or gender flexibility may be revitalised. Feminist ideas could enhance the egalitarian practices already present in some Orang Asli tribes, resulting in more balanced power dynamics.

2. Women's Role in Decision-making and Politics

In many Orang Asli tribes, women are heavily involved in decision-making, especially when it comes to issues pertaining to the community and the family. However, men have traditionally held the majority of leadership roles, especially those pertaining to formal governance or external affairs. Feminist concepts of gender equality could challenge patriarchal governance structures within Orang Asli communities and push for more women to have a formal voice in leadership and decision-making processes. On the other hand, any push for gender equality must be done with cultural sensitivity, respecting the community's traditional structures and decision-making processes, and ensuring that change is community-driven rather than externally imposed.

3. Education and Gender Equality

A key component of gender equality is access to education, and in many Orang Asli communities, discrimination, poverty, and remote location present obstacles for both men and women seeking an education. However, cultural traditions that value male education over female education and the difficulties of juggling household duties with academic goals are some of the other barriers that Indigenous women could encounter. By advocating for laws ensuring Orang Asli women and girls equal access to education, feminist ideas of gender equality could equip them with the skills and information. This is necessary for them to participate effectively in cultivation. Some Orang Asli communities may be resistant to formal education systems because they perceive them as strange or unrelated to traditional knowledge, although culturally sensitive programs that incorporate community involvement may have greater effectiveness.

4. Supporting Indigenous Laws and Customs While Encouraging Gender Equality

Orang Asli communities have their own customary laws that govern social relationships, including gender roles. These laws are often deeply connected to the community's worldview, cultural practices, and spirituality. Introducing feminist concepts of gender equality could potentially challenge these customary laws, especially if they involve practices that are perceived as unequal or restrictive to women. The freedom of Orang Asli communities to establish their own gender roles and customs must be respected by gender equality efforts. Any outside interventions must be properly planned to prevent compromising long-standing laws that have developed over many generations. However, feminism could coexist with Orang Asli customs to support gender equality-aligned reforms, like acknowledging women's leadership in the community or tackling issues like gender-based violence in a way that respects Indigenous justice practices.

5. Protection Against Gender-Based Exploitation

In many societies, including Indigenous groups, gender-based violence which includes sexual violence, domestic abuse, and harassment is a severe problem. Orang Asli women may face increased vulnerability due to both their gender and their marginalized status as Indigenous people. Better advocacy and support for Orang Asli women who experience violence based on their gender may result from feminist frameworks that emphasise gender equality. These frameworks might advocate better access to social services, healthcare, and legal recourse. However, initiatives must also be mindful of how these issues are addressed within the context of Indigenous laws and community structures, ensuring that solutions are culturally appropriate and respect community autonomy.

Feminism and gender equality have a variety of effects on Orang Asli laws and customs. Feminist notions of gender equality can offer a framework for tackling gender inequality and promoting Orang Asli women's rights. However, their use must respect the community's cultural norms and traditional government institutions. Community-driven, culturally aware, and cognisant of the two issues Orang Asli women confront gender discrimination and the lingering effects of colonialism are the finest methods for identifying answers. Giving Orang Asli tribes the freedom to define and work towards gender equality on their own terms should be the ultimate objective.

5. Recommendations

Respect for the community's cultural identity, self-determination, and traditional practices must be at the heart of any recommendations for incorporating feminist ideas and gender equality practices into Orang Asli laws and customs. To ensure that any reforms are culturally aware, sustainable, and significant for their communities, this

entails collaborating with the Orang Asli people. Some of the recommendations are as follows:

a. Promoting Community-Based Feminist. Encourage the establishment of indigenous feminist networks or local women's groups to provide a platform for women to express their concerns and provide answers in the communities. Besides, organise gender equality seminars or community conversations, making sure that both men and women participate and that their customs are respected while talking about the need for gender justice.

b. Respect for Indigenous Legal Systems and Customary Laws. Collaborate with Orang Asli leaders, elders, and legal practitioners to explore how gender equality can be incorporated into their customary laws in ways that respect their traditions. Any reform should build on existing structures, strengthening the roles of women where they already have influence and leadership within the traditional systems of governance.

c. Building Capacity and Providing Gender-Sensitive Education

Promote educational initiatives that are adapted to the requirements of Orang Asli communities, such as those that focus on females' education, which respects both modern and traditional knowledge. Support scholarship and mentorship programs for Orang Asli girls to pursue further education, empowering them to take on leadership roles in their communities.

d. Foster Women's Leadership and Political Participation

Encourage the inclusion of women in leadership positions within community councils, political decision-making, and dispute resolution processes, where appropriate. This could involve recognizing the traditional roles women have in other aspects of society, such as caregiving and teaching, as forms of leadership. To prepare Orang Asli women for positions in local governance and decision-making organisations, support the development of gender-inclusive leadership training programs.

e. Encourage Sustainable Economic Opportunities for Women

Support the development of income-generating activities for Orang Asli women, such as handicrafts, agriculture, and small-scale entrepreneurship, while ensuring that these activities are culturally appropriate and sustainable. Provide training in financial literacy, business management, and other skills to help Orang Asli women become more economically independent and facilitate access to microfinance or cooperative programs that allow Orang Asli women to start and grow businesses, improving their economic security.

f. Enforce Law Reform and Collaborative Policy Advocacy

Work with the Orang Asli communities to advocate for policies that promote gender equality, such as land rights, educational access, healthcare, and legal protection from violence, while respecting Indigenous laws and governance. Furthermore, collaborate with legal experts to ensure that national laws protect Orang Asli women's rights while also respecting Indigenous legal systems and traditions.

Feminist outlines can be modified to empower these communities in ways that are significant and sustainable by addressing the difficulties experienced by Orang Asli women, maintaining cultural integrity, and involving the community in discussions about gender equality. To build a more gender-equitable society that fits with their customs and self-identified needs, it is important to collaborate with the Orang Asli rather than imposing outside solutions.

6. Conclusion

This study explores Orang Asli women's interpretations on gender equality and indigenous feminism that contribute towards the implications for the indigenous customs and laws in Malaysia. This study highlights the nuanced experiences of Orang Asli women at the intersection of gender, culture, and law. While Malaysia's Federal Constitution and international instruments such as CEDAW affirm gender equality, the findings reveal limited awareness and access to rights among Orang Asli women, particularly in areas of employment, education, and protection from violence. Legal gaps in frameworks like the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, coupled with entrenched customary norms, continue to restrict the realization of these rights in practice. Relating to feminism aspects, the findings showed that Orang Asli women mostly perceived that education is essential for them and they have a great appreciation for their communities and culture. Additionally, the study's results show that Orang Asli women believe they are discriminated against or stereotyped in their community among men and other races.

The thematic analysis highlights four leading themes that emerged are domestic tasks and community contribution, work for a living, the right to freedom, and gender equality and prospects. Each theme illustrates the importance of the feminism ideology and gender equality activities for Orang Asli women in indigenous community. Additionally, they are essential to the advancement of gender equality and feminism and improve existing indigenous customs and laws. The perspectives of Orang Asli women regarding gender equality and feminism may have a big impact on Indigenous laws and practices. The call for feminism concepts and gender equality practices might lead to a reevaluation of existing indigenous customs and laws, potentially challenging patriarchal structures that have been deep-rooted in their communities. This could spark dialogue within communities about how laws and practices could evolve to become more inclusive

without compromising their cultural heritage. The study therefore makes several recommendations aimed at altering Orang Asli customs and laws in the direction of gender equality because they support universal human rights, empower women, and aid in the community's sustainable development. In addition to maintaining their distinct identity and customs, these reforms would enable Orang Asli women to fully engage in society, enhancing their social, economic, and cultural roles.

Acknowledgements

Funding for this research work is kindly supported by The Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS 1/2021), Ministry of Higher Education. We also thank the Orang Asli Development Agency (JAKOA), Malaysia in their contribution and assistance for this project.

References

- Amat Simin, Mohamad Hafis, Ramle Abdullah, and Asmawi Ibrahim. 2015. "Influence of Local Leadership in Poverty Eradication among the Orang Asli Communities in the State of Terengganu, Malaysia." *Asian Social Science* 11 (21). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n21p342>.
- "Article 153, Federal Constitution of Malaysia." 1957. <http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/const/1957/12.html>
- Asian Indigenous & Tribal Peoples Network (2008). *The Department of Orang Asli Affairs, Malaysia—an agency for assimilation*. New Delhi: Asian Indigenous & Tribal Peoples Network.
- Baharom, Nor Azmi, and Pakhriazad Hassan Zaki. 2020. "Socioeconomic Temiar Community in RPS Kemar, Hulu Perak." IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science 596 (December): 012072. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/596/1/012072>.
- Baharun, H. and Ismail. H. 2022. "Between Us and Them: Examining the Indigenous People of Malaysia as Represented in The Mainstream News Media". *Al-Azkiyaa - International Journal of Language and Education* 1 (1):22-34. <https://doi.org/10.33102/alazkiyaa.v1i1.6>.
- Bisrat Teklesilassie Yazew. 2024. "Women's Contributions versus Men's Patriarchal Status among Afar Pastoralists in the Lower Awash Valley." *Heliyon* 10 (14): e34469–69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e34469>.
- Dahlum, Sirianne, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Valeriya Mechkova. 2022. "Women's Political Empowerment and Economic Growth." *World Development* 156 (August): 105822. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105822>.
- Diansyah, Mohammad Wahyu, Azlan Abas, and Zaini Sakawi. 2022. "Exploring the Relevance of Engaging the Orang Asli in Malaysia's Forest Management." *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change* 5 (November). <https://doi.org/10.3389/ffgc.2022.1019994>.
- Dong, M. M., Midmore, P. and Plotnikova, M. 2022. "Understanding the experiences of

- Indigenous minorities through the lens of spatial justice: The case of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia.” *Regional Science Policy & Practice* 14 (5).
- Eagly, Alice H., Mona G. Makhijani, and Bruce G. Klonsky. 1992. “Gender and the Evaluation of Leaders: A Meta-Analysis.” *Psychological Bulletin* 111 (1): 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.111.1.3>.
- “Federal Constitution (Malaysia) art 8(5)(c)”, 1957. <http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/const/1957/12.html>
- Fotaki, Marianna, and Alison Pullen. 2023. “Feminist Theories and Activist Practices in Organization Studies.” *Organization Studies* 45 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231209861>
- Hussain, Faridah, Kemala Alang, Nur Izzati Ariffin, and Marina Ismail. 2023. “Aboriginal Ethnic Group Commonly Known as Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: Re-Examining the Right to Take Forest Produce.” *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 12 (3). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v12-i3/19035>.
- “Indigenous Peoples, Gender, and Natural Resource Management from INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, GENDER, and NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT on JSTOR.” 2025. *Jstor.com*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/resrep15621.5>.
- “Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA)”. Jadual Taburan Etnik Orang Asli Mengikut Negeri.(2023) <https://www.jakoa.gov.my/>
- Karim, Rafidah Abd, Azurawati Zaidi, Farhani Che, Syaza Kamarudin, and Wan Faridatul. 2023. “Jahai Voices of Malaysia: Exploring Indigenous Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development in the Royal Belum State Park.” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 13 (4): 987–98. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i4/16093>.
- KA CHUN, WONG, and MARLINA JAMAL. 2023. “Intertextual Representation of the Orang Asli in the Malaysian Online News Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis.” *International Journal of Language, Literacy and Translation* 6 (2): 242–57. <https://doi.org/10.36777/ijollt2023.6.2.090>.
- Karim, R. A., Mustapha, R., & Zainol, N. S. (2022). Women Leadership in Higher Learning Institutions: Malaysia’s Challenging Path to SDG 5. In the *DAKAM (Eastern Mediterranean Academic Research Center) Studies in Humanities Conference Proceedings Fall 2022*
- Karim, R.A.,Mustapha, R., Wahab, N.A., Aliasak, M.H.H., Ghani, N.F.C. & Zainol. N. Z. “Gender Equality and Feminism in Indigenous Society: A Case of Jahai Women in Malaysia”. In *The 7th International Conference on Gender Research* 7 no. 1 (2024).
- Loke, Vivienne P. W., Teckwyn Lim, and Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz. 2020. “Hunting Practices of the Jahai Indigenous Community in Northern Peninsular Malaysia.” *Global Ecology and Conservation* 21 (March): e00815. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2019.e00815>.
- Masron, T., Masami, F., & Ismail, N. “Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia: population, spatial distribution and socio-economic condition”. *Journal of Ritsumeikan Social Sciences*

- Humanities* 6 (2013): 75-115.
- Nah, Alice M. 2008. "Recognizing Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysian Law: Rights and Realities for the Orang Asli (Aborigines) of Peninsular Malaysia." *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 164 (2-3): 212–37. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003657>.
- Niigaaniin, Mamaweswen, and Timothy MacNeill. 2022. "Indigenous Culture and Nature Relatedness: Results from a Collaborative Study." *Environmental Development* 44 (September): 100753. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envdev.2022.100753>.
- Nordin, Rohaida, Muhamad Sayuti Hassan@Yahya, Vatchira Wong Rui Fern, Melissa Cherley, and Lavernya Bala Subramaniam. 2020. "INDIGENOUS EDUCATION for the ORANG ASLI: LEGAL PERSPECTIVES and BEST PRACTICES." *Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS)* 5 (2): 365–83. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol5iss2pp365-383>.
- OHCHR. (2013). UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, HR/PUB/13/2, August 2013.
- Padzil, R and Somiah, V. 2023. "'Leaderless' Resistance? An Anatomy of Female Leadership in Orang Asli Grassroots Movements." 2023. *Wacana: Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 24 (2). <https://doi.org/10.17510/wacana.v24i2.1166>.
- Parker, Jonathan, Sara Ashencaen Crabtree, M Crabtree Parker, and I Crabtree Parker. 2019. "'Behaving like a Jakun!' a Case Study of Conflict, 'Othering' and Indigenous Knowledge in the Orang Asli of Tasik Chini," September.
- Patittingi, Farida. 2020. "New Paradigm in Natural Resources Management: Securing Indigenous Peoples Rights." *Hasanuddin Law Review* 6 (1): 56. <https://doi.org/10.20956/halrev.v6i1.2267>.
- Rohlinger, D. A., Olsen, A., & Hewitt, L. (2020, July). "Dualing discourse: Democracy, gender equity and discursive politics in rural Morocco". In *Women's Studies International Forum* 81, (2020) : 102373). Pergamon.
- Shaari, J., Zulkifli, N.B. I., Abu. R., Ibrahim, C.W.I R.C.W., Razab & N.A, Embong, A.M. Orang Asli Knowledge – The Wisdom Inheritance of Indigenous Peoples., *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30 no. 5 (2024) : 11952-11966
- Smith, Sonya G., and Jeanne C. Sinkford. 2022. "Gender Equality in the 21st Century: Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership in Global Health." *Journal of Dental Education* 86 (9): 1144–73.
- Subramaniam, Yogeswaran. 2015. "Ethnicity, Indigeneity and Indigenous Rights: The 'Orang Asli' Experience." *QUT Law Review* 15 (1). <https://doi.org/10.5204/qutlr.v15i1.562>.
- Suria Angit (Temiar, and Adrian Jarvis. 2024. "An Indigenous View of Social Justice Leadership in the Malaysian Education System." *Alternative* 20 (1): 215–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801241235422>.
- The Status of Women's Rights in Malaysia." n.d. <https://www.suhakam.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/SUHAKAM-Report-on-The-Status-of-Women-s-Rights->

[in-Malaysia-2010.pdf](#).

- Tong, Rosemarie. 2022. "Towards a Feminist Global Ethics." *Global Bioethics* 33 (1): 14–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11287462.2021.2011002>.
- UN Women Commission on the Status of Women. (2020). accessed February 2 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>
- United Nations. (1979). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instrumentsmechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>
- Widya, Thesya, and Asnani Asnani. 2020. "RADICAL FEMINISM in EKA KURNIAWAN'S NOVEL BEAUTY IS a WOUND." *JOURNAL of LANGUAGE* 2 (1): 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.30743/jol.v2i1.2477>.
- Wook, Izawati. 2015. "THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES ACT 1954 and the RECOGNITION of ORANG ASLI LAND RIGHTS." *UUM Journal of Legal Studies*, December. <https://doi.org/10.32890/uumjls.6.2015.4587>.
- Yap, Wai-Sum, Alvin Cengnata, Woei-Yuh Saw, Thuhairah Abdul Rahman, Yik-Ying Teo, Renee Lay-Hong Lim, and Boon-Peng Hoh. 2025. "High-Coverage Whole-Genome Sequencing of a Jakun Individual from the 'Orang Asli' Proto-Malay Subtribe from Peninsular Malaysia." *Human Genome Variation* 12 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41439-024-00308-6>.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The author(s) declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationship that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Copyright: © HALREV. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Hasanuddin Law Review (Hasanuddin Law Rev. – HALREV) is an open access and peer-reviewed journal published by Faculty of Law, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia.

Open Access 