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Jahai Voices of Malaysia: Exploring Indigenous Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development in the Royal Belum State Park

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Abstract

Social development is a key pillar of sustainable development. Sustainability is linked not only to the environment, but also to the social and economic surroundings, forming the three pillars that aim to ensure the integrity of the world and to raise the standard of living. The Jahai tribes are an indigenous people or Orang Asli in Malaysia. It is important to identify the role and contribution of Jahai women in their community. The needs, desires and interests of indigenous men and women differ from one another as they have their own respective roles and responsibilities. The roles and contributions in Jahai women should be able to empower them and give Malaysian a better perspective of Jahai women in Royal Belum State Park, Malaysia. Therefore, this paper explores the Jahai tribe women roles and contributions toward sustainable development in Royal Belum State Park. This study employs a qualitative case study which includes in-depth interview and focus group interview for data collection. The research study was based on Transnational Feminist Theory (TFT) approach that can be used to assess the current environment concerning recognition of gender-based persecution. This study reveals that Jahai women play a significant role in supporting the sustainable development in Royal Belum. This scholarly discovery may benefit us to understand how the indigenous women can contribute towards sustainable development and provide insight into the strategies that the relevant authorities may take the initiatives for helping the country to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Keywords: Jahai Women, Roles, Sustainable Development, Royal Belum State Park, Transnational Feminist, Orang Asli.

Introduction

The Royal Belum State Park is a unique forest reserve which has rich history and biodiversity. In Royal Belum, the Jahai tribe of Orang Asli have been living in Royal Belum for generations. They are one of 18 tribes of indigenous peoples of Malaysia. The Jahai who lives in the Belum forest are primarily hunters and gatherers. According to the Encyclopedia of Humanities of

Orang Asli (2022), the involvement of indigenous women in social and political domain are still limited. By employing Transnational Feminism theory (TFT), such approach would enable indigenous women especially the Jahai in analysing their roles despite gender and social inequality in presenting their position and voice in the Jahai tribe as an indigenous society. According to Transnational Feminism (Desai, 2007) refers both to the practices of women's movements around the world and to a theoretical perspective in which women theorize and strategize for women's rights and gender justice across national boundaries, work in collaboration with women from other countries, and frame their activism in terms that are both local and global. The empowerment of indigenous women is so important in achieving sustainable development. Sustainability means meeting the needs without compromising the ability of future generations to fulfill their own needs. In addition to natural resources, the Jahai women also need social and economic resources. Therefore, by investigating the role and contribution of Jahai women in terms of needs, desires and interests of their own respective roles and responsibilities. This would provide a better understanding to the Jahai women self-determination in ensuring sustainable development of the Jahai community.

Literature Review

Indigenous Women in Malaysia

Aboriginal people who are also known as Orang Asli are one group of indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia. The Orang Asli consist of three major ethnic groups, the Senoi, Semang (Negritos) and the Proto-Malay (Nicholas et al., 2010; Likin et al., 2018). The men and women of the aboriginal's people in Malaysia share their roles in empowering their own people. The Orang Asli women in Malaysia mostly live in the forest and practice the traditional ways of living which are largely influenced by their ancestor practice. According to the Cultural Survival (2018) many indigenous women in Malaysia are facing many discriminations for example poor access to education, lack of access to health and services and facing emotional, sexual and physical abuse. For instance, for Penan indigenous students who live in rural areas face problems with transportations and access to schools as they need to use timber roads and boats to send the children to school. Furthermore, the existence of internet access is almost impossible for the communities as telecommunication companies are not obliged to invest their services in the remotely rural areas where large communities of indigenous located (Cultural Survival, 2018). Apart from that, based on the survey conducted by Sabah Women Action Resources Group (SAWO), at least 47% adult women suffered from emotional, sexual and physical abuse. Most of the victims are lacking support and protection thus it is an outcry for the indigenous people to seek protection from the government. In terms of access to healthcare, the indigenous women also have limited access to a proper medical treatment especially those who are located in rural areas and this is also due the burden of privatization of healthcare in Malaysia that will hinder the chances to an accessibility to health care and services (Cultural Survival, 2018). Besides that, according to the International Labour Force (2017), Orang Asli despite women's extensive contribution to social, economic and culture in their communities, they are still sidelined from the decision-making opportunities. Most of the time, men had control over the resources and women were defenseless against social and economic exploitation and gender-based violence thus resulting in imbalance in gender equality.

Jahai people in Royal Belum State Park in Malaysia

Jahai is one of the Orang Asli group who live around the Royal Belum State Park Malaysia and only a sub-group of the Semang (Negritos) compared to other tribes like Senoi and Proto-Malay. The Senoi are the largest group and The Proto Malays are the second largest group of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (Ghani et al., 2015). The Jahai tribe look alike with Habsyi people or Negro in African, Andaman Tribes and Aeta in Philippines. The populations usually live along the rivers and lakes. They still live in a nomadic way and normally move to other places due to illness, dying, quarreling among group members, lack of food resources and addition of family members. Their hut is simple and is made of bamboo, bertam and tepus leaves (Masron et al., 2013). The Royal Belum State Park, Perak Malaysia originally was gazetted as Belum Forest Reserve in 1971 and in 2007, it was conserved as National Heritage for biodiversity conservation to facilitate biodiversity education, research and ecotourism (Unesco.org, 2017). According to Hill et al., 2006; Hatin et al., 2011; Yew et al., 2018; Loke et al., 2019, the Jahai are also believed to be direct descendants of the first group of modern humans to have existed in the Malay Peninsula at least around 50,000 years ago. The population is currently around 2400 people and most of Jahai people practice hunting and fishing as their main sources for living (Loke et al., 2019). The Jahai people, who are traditionally nomadic, live in permanent settlements in parts of the Royal Belum State Parks as part of the tourist attraction. They lived in isolation, and most likely lacked infrastructures such as roads, schools, health services, and so on. This resulted in exhaustion of resources. According to Likin et al (2018), the population of the village is 173 people. Each family usually consists of five to six people. The average rate of Jahai's tribe age married are 18 to 19 years. The organizational structure of tribal society Jahai is very clear. The role of women as mothers, wives and care for children. While the role of men as fathers, husbands and search of sustenance. Head of the household is male. The division of wealth in society in Jahai is bilateral. The property will be divided equally among the heirs of men and women.

Transnational Feminist Theory (TFT)

Transnational feminist perspectives concentrate on the various experiences of women who live within, between, and at the margins or boundaries of nation-states around the globe; they transcend nation-state boundaries and speak to a wide range of interacting forces that have an impact on gendered relationships and experiences in a geopolitical context. They also encompass "border work" and communication across traditional global boundaries; may occur in global, regional, and local contexts; and include the experiences of immigrants, refugees, displaced persons, those who have experienced forced migration, members of a cultural diaspora who may be dispersed across multiple regions, as well as those who identify themselves as third-culture persons and persons who are attempting to integrate multiple cultural identities (Horne & Arora, 2013). Transnational feminist theory and practice emphasize intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, social activism and justice, and collaboration. They seek to destabilize notions that women around the world share the same types of experiences, oppressions, forms of exploitation, and privileges; they explore differences and inequalities between women, such as different priorities and ways of understanding gender issues and different ways of conceptualizing agency. Transnational and postcolonial feminisms highlight social-structural factors that exacerbate power differences, including colonialism and neo-colonialism, economic realities, and global capitalism (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). Central features of transnational feminisms include efforts to foster transnational solidarity and collaboration between feminists who are from different countries or the

diaspora and who value difference as a foundation for activism. Respect for differences includes recognizing global power differences and regional perspectives, listening to women from Southern regions whose experiences challenge partial viewpoints, viewing differences among women as opportunities to enrich our understandings of complex issues, and highlighting the perspectives of women whose voices have often been silenced (Collins et al., 2019).

Sustainable Development in Malaysia

In Malaysia, Sustainable development is not merely environmental protection, but also involves quality of life, the distribution of resources and benefits, interactions between the environment and development, and provisions for the future (Department of The Environment and Local Government, 1995). The existing definitions tend to imply that all the attempts are to lead us to the long-term objective of sustainability and that you therefore act socially responsible in a company or organization aligned with the greater aim of society called sustainable development and these are all to attain sustainability (Seifi & Crowther, 2011). Recently, the increasing research in social and environment is a proof of the debate on the importance of achieving sustainable development (Laine, 2005). Byrach et al (2009) adopted a multi method design, combining questionnaires, semi-structured interview and Q methodology in their study exploring the meaning of sustainable development among prominent business leaders in New Zealand. Using the Q methodology, the researchers were able to characterize five typical conceptions of sustainable development. These were: 1. socialist; 2. ecologist; 3. realist; 4. Futurist and 5. Individualist. It was explained that the five views have different emphasis which subsequently has resulted in policy diversity. The relationship between humanity and nature and actions required by the five typical views of sustainable development (Joseph, 2013).

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The study's purpose is to explore the Jahai tribe women roles and contributions toward sustainable development in Royal Belum State Park. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To investigate the Jahai tribe women's perceptions towards the natural environment of the settlement (Royal Belum State Park)
2. To investigate the Jahai tribe women roles in the society in terms of economic, social aspects and in ensuring environmental protection of the Royal Belum State Park
3. To explore the Jahai tribe cultural practices and traditions in the Jahai community
4. To explore Jahai tribe women perceptions of the gender equality in the Jahai community

Methodology

Research Instrument

The respondents of the study received the qualitative open-ended questions as part of face-to-face interview. For the in-depth interviews, the respondents responded to three open-ended questions which aims to measure the Jahai women's views on their roles for preserving the sustainable development goals in the Jahai community. Similarly, the respondents for the focus group interview were also needed to answer three open-ended questions. For the focus group interview, the three open-ended items were determined to examine the roles and

responsibilities toward the cultural practices and traditions and gender equality among Jahai women in the Royal Belum State Park. The objective of gathering open-ended text narratives was to discover consistent thematic groups that emerged inductively from text story replies to specified focus questions.

Participants of the Study

In this study, the respondents were selected as a sample of 21 Jahai women drawn from 105 people from Kampung Klewang and 400 people from Kampung Sungai Tiang total population. Eight Jahai women were involved for the in-depth interviews and thirteen Jahai women were selected for the focus group interviews. Five respondents from Kampung Sungai Klewang and three respondents from Kampung Sungai Tiang involved in the in-depth interviews. For the focus group interview, six Jahai women from Kampung Sungai Tiang and seven Jahai women from Kampung Klewang were involved in the interviews of the study. The average age of respondents involved in this study was 40 years (range = 20–50). Figure 1 shows the Jahai tribe women from Royal Belum State Park where we conducted the interviews.



Figure 1: The photo of Jahai Tribe women in Royal Belum State Park, Perak, Malaysia

Research Sites

The Royal Belum State Park is located on the eastern border of Peninsular Malaysia's Western Belt, exactly at the geodynamic boundary between two continental plates (Sibumasu and East Malaya plates). The Royal Belum is trusted and has been around for about 130 million years, making it one of the world's oldest rainforests, older than the Amazon and Congo Rainforests. The Royal Belum State Park is only accessible by boat via the public jetty on Pulau Banding (Banding Island), which is in the State Park's southern part. It covers an area of 1175 km² and encircles the northern sections of Tasik Temengor, a massive man-made lake built in the 1970s, with the town's only accessible by boat. We chose two Jahai communities for this study which are Kampung Sungai Tiang and Kampung Klewang at Royal Belum State Park, Malaysia.

Research Design

To conduct the study, the exploration of Jahai women empowerment and sustainable development in the Royal Belum State Park were investigated using the qualitative case study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this approach, we combined individual in-depth interviews and focus group interviews data collection to develop data richness from a study on the

exploration the Jahai tribe women contributions toward sustainable development in Royal Belum State Park. In-depth interviews are useful when you need specific info about a person's thoughts and actions or when you want to delve deeply into a new issue (Boyce & Neale, 2006). On the other hand, the focus groups provide a more natural environment than individual interviews because respondents influence and are impacted by others- just as they are in actual situations (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Therefore, the data was collected using the integration of these two types of interviews. The open-ended questions were presented to the selected respondents of the study. We conducted the interviews in Bahasa Melayu (the Malay language) with the assistance of one field assistant who can speak in the Jahai language.

Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was employed as the analytic technique. Thematic analysis is the study's relationship with the data acquired. Consequently, it emphasises the approach's adaptability, which allows it to deal when data must be obtained independently at various times (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All audio recordings were listened to by the interviewers, and the transcription accuracy was double-checked. Using manual thematic analysis and continual data comparison, the primary categories and themes were found and categorised by going through all the data line by line. The data was analysed meticulously from all angles to provide a complete description of diverse jobs, and the data was translated into English. All data was coded, reviewed, and discussed by the principal researcher.

Results and Discussion

The integration of focus group and individual interview data created the exploration, and the interpretation of individual accounts and successive individual data further enriched the conceptualisation of the phenomenon. The transcripts of the interviews revealed three major themes concerning Jahai women empowerment and sustainable development in the Royal Belum State Park: (1) women and sustainable development, (2) gender equality and women empowerment and (3) cultural practices and tradition toward sustainability.

Theme 1: Indigenous Women and Sustainable Development

The results from the thematic analysis showed the first theme emerged was "Indigenous Women and Sustainable Development". All Jahai women considered the sustainable development as main aspect in indigenous women empowerment. The data analyses from the in-depth interviews and the focus group interviews revealed that the Jahai women had positive perceptions towards the natural environments of the settlement. According to Principle 20, Rio Declaration (1972), women play an important role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is thus required to reach sustainable development. All respondents agreed that they love the natural environment of this Royal Belum State Park. One of the respondents answered that she just wanted to stay in the Royal Belum since she lived there since childhood. Respondent 3 and respondent 5 stated the same expressions that they really love the nature because they stay away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Yes, I lived here...from my childhood until now and I do not want to move to the city area (Respondent 5 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

Yes, I love the nature... it is not busy environment (Respondent 3 from Kampung Klewang)

Yes, I feel close with the nature (Respondent 4 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

Apparently, the respondents also believe that the Royal Belum State Park is great for settlement which can directly provide water-supply where they need to rely on water sourced from the nearby hills for their daily usage. They are still carrying out their traditional lifestyle to wash the dishes, take a bath and farming using natural water resources from the riverside. In the interviews, we asked the respondents the ways they protect the environment of the Royal Belum. The respondents presented several personal perspectives regarding this question. Based on the results, the Jahai women expressed their concern about the importance of having clean and sustainable environment of the Royal Belum State Park.

I dislike visitors doing open burning at my area. I wish to let them know, but I just inform my family members (Respondent 1 from Kampung Klewang)

I will make sure me myself do not throw rubbish everywhere... We have specific area to dump the rubbish and our headman (Tok Batin) will collect them and transfer the rubbish to another island which has no residents there...usually, they will use small boats to transfer the rubbish from here to that island. The island is not far away... it's just about less than 10 minutes to be there (Respondent 2 from Kampung Klewang)

I will show my good attitudes in protecting this forest... and my children will follow my footsteps. I love the cleanliness of this forest....majority of the people help each other to make sure our "kampung" (village)... is in healthy environment (Respondent 3 from Kampung Klewang)

I feel save living in this forest.... I always give advises to my children and my neighbourhood to keep our environment (Respondent 5 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

This demonstrates that the Jahai women play the important roles in the environmental management of the Royal Belum State Park as they protect and preserve the area. Further, we explored the Jahai women roles in their community in terms of economic and social aspects in ensuring the environmental protection of the Royal Belum. Concerning to the Jahai people in the Royal Belum, it clearly can be seen that each individual takes the responsibility in protecting the environment and preserving the natural resources toward the sustainability development.

My husband is a leader of this "kampung". Therefore, his leadership skills have helped me too... in order to help residents keep this environment safe and clean. Indirectly..... my role is giving good social practices to women here in protecting the forest (Respondent 1 from Kampung Klewang)

For economic aspect, we involve in development of commercial agricultural crops.... like corns and we sell to the people outside. We also sell the corns to the visitors.... while they are having their time here (Respondent 2 from Kampung Klewang)

We have kids studying at “sekolah rendah”(primary school here.... sometimes, the kids told us that the teachers always reminded us to keep our environment neat, safe and clean. For me, this is one of the ways... my kids play a role in the society to make sure our village free from pollution (Respondent 3 from Kampung Klewang)

Yes.... my daughter also told the same thing too. The teachers at school repeatedly reminded us that we are special living in the forest...that full of natural resources and calming environment (Respondent 4 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

In terms of the economic aspect, data obtained from the tribal elders elucidated that majority of Jahai people in the Royal Belum encounter substantial skills in forestry works. Therefore, they believed that settling in forest is the best resolve to sustain their tribal family members. They believe they have applied many natural resources for their traditional practices for their survival in forest. In this research, the data discovered that the Jahai people are still depending on natural resources as their primary economic purposes. They frequently use old fishing technique to catch fish by using spearfishing as the old-fashioned method in their daily lives. Apart from that, these tribes are still using cleaver and axe for harvesting plants nearby their hutches. For hunting activities, there were various methods used to hunt for specific wildlife. As an illustration, the Jahai people used bamboo blowpipe to hunt for hornbills, squirrels and deers. In addition, they used traditional method to capture partridge, mousedeer, and porcupine. They also used many old techniques to capture aquatic wildlife. To illustrate they used hook, diving, archery, fishing road, bare hand bamboo trap and nets. Hence, that is why Jahai tribe women’s perceptions towards the natural environment of the settlement has promoted positive influences in their lifestyle.

Theme 2: Cultural Practices and Tradition toward Sustainability

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in culture as a mediator or driver of sustainable development (Davies, 2020). To develop a new model of culturally sensitive urban development, the role of cultural practices and values in sustainable development must be explicitly acknowledged, supported, and integrated into planning and policy in a systematic and comprehensive manner. The second theme emerged from the focus group interviews was cultural practices and tradition toward sustainability. The respondents from Kampung Klewang answered that they normally did not practice any tradition. However, the women and men will participate in feasts and ceremonies, as well as assist the villagers. They also will join the Sewang dance during the feasts and ceremonies. Sewang is a type of ritual dance performed in groups for reasons such as celebration, spirit worship, and medicine.

We will do Sewang dance... when we attend the feasts and ceremonies (Respondent 1 from Kampung Klewang)

Remarkably, the Jahai women in Kampung Sungai Tiang provided various responses from the interviews we carried for the study.

While we are hunting for hornbill bird (burung enggang).... it is forbidden for us to wash it by using water (Respondent 7 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

Yes, we are not supposed to take a shower outside during rainy days... we are forbidden to look our face on the river (Respondent 6 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

Yes, it is forbidden for us to look at the mirror... during rainy days, we should not take a shower... when the thunderstorm strikes (Respondent 7 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

From the responses, it showed that they practiced Jahai traditional superstitions in the community. Some traditional superstitions still held and practiced by Jahai people and for them this is a preservation of their tribal identity.

Theme 3: Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

Based on the focus interview results, we established the third theme which was gender equality and women empowerment. These results achieved our fourth objectives of the study which is aims to explore Jahai tribe women perceptions of the gender equality in the Jahai community. The empowerment of women is a critical component of achieving gender equality. It entails increasing a woman's self-esteem, decision-making power, access to opportunities and resources, power and control over her own life both inside and outside the home, and ability to effect change. In this study, we asked whether the Jahai women spouse do house chores at home. We mostly received similar responses from the thirteen interviewees from both villages.

My husband did the cooking part. as well as look after our children. He also cooked for us (Respondent 5 from Kampung Klewang)

We are doing our house chores together... my husband always assists me at home (Respondent 7 from Kampung Klewang)

Yes, normally I would cook...and my husband takes care of the children (Respondent 11 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

Therefore, it can be concluded that most husbands do help the wife with house chores. However, there was one respondent who responded that her husband did not help her with the house chores at home.

No, only sleep after coming back home... I did more of the house chores as compared to my husband (Respondent 4 from Kampung Klewang)

Concerning to the family source of income, the Jahai women said that their husband work to support the family. The responses of interviews revealed the types of work the husband does to accommodate daily life in the Royal Belum. The results showed that most husbands work as fisherman, hunting and searching for jungle products like woods, stingless bee, agarwood in the jungle.

Yes, he went fishing in the river... he also went to the jungle... hunting animals for us to eat. (Respondent 2 from Kampung Klewang)

Yes, searching for stingless bee honey (madu kelulut) and agarwood (kayu gaharu)...he went to the jungle for several days. (Respondent 7 from Kampung Klewang)

Yes...., he is a security guard at a school (Respondent 10 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

My husband works as a boat driver (Respondent 11 from Kampung Sungai Tiang)

In terms of the housework distributions, majority of the women answered that their husbands help them a lot with the housework. Moreover, the Jahai women agreed that the housework duties and responsibilities are distributed equally at home.

Yes... my husband can take care of the kids while I do other things (Respondent 4, Kampung Klewang)

Yes, the work is fairly split (Respondent 5 from Kampung Klewang)

Therefore, the results indicated that the Jahai women are assisted by the husbands in doing the housework. This meant that the women were treated equally, and no gender bias practiced in the Jahai community.

Conclusion

This study discovered that all respondents appreciate and value the natural environment of the settlement (Royal Belum State Park) and they are committed in ensuring the environmental protection of the Royal Belum State Park. There are three main themes emerged from this study which are indigenous women and sustainable development, cultural practices and tradition toward sustainability and gender equality and women empowerment. They do believe their active participation plays significant role that contributes to the economy and the social aspects of the Jahai people. Based on this research, there are still some of Jahai people who still practice cultural practices and traditions in the Jahai community. Regarding gender equality, Jahai men do participate in helping their wives in managing the household. This study reveals that Jahai women play a significant role in supporting the sustainable development in Royal Belum. Furthermore, the community and economy benefit when we empower women to be leaders and decision-makers. The empowerment of Orang Asli women can be seen in terms of culture, education, decision-making, and work skills that can be promoted in the tourism, education, management, and job fields, as well as to improve the economy of the society and nation (Karim et al., 2021). Therefore, it is an opportunity of further research of this area concerning this finding. Since this study has its own unique background, situation, methods and participants, the above findings cannot be generalized due to such limitations, until more studies in various contexts are conducted. This study was limited in the size of participants and of language barrier. Future studies should further expand to include a higher number of participants and of less language barrier. This study is also limited geographically, as only respondents from Kampung Sungai Tiang and Kampung Klewang participated in this study, which may have excluded other Jahai people of other villages. Nevertheless, the findings and implications of this study will serve as a reference and an inspiration for subsequent research to further explore the Jahai tribe women contributions toward sustainable development in Royal Belum State Park.

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