



A Case Study of Orang Asli Women Role in Achieving Gender Equality

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Article Info

Received:

19 March 2021

Accepted:

30 March 2021

Publish

01 April 2021

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e-ISSN 2682-759X

Abstract

The issue of gender equality is a dense phenomenon, and it has given an increase to numerous policies across the countries around the world. Women are discriminated against, no matter where they are situated. It involves all areas of life such as health and nutrition, education, employment, and politics. Women all over the world should have equal rights and opportunities. The purpose of the study is to explore the role of Orang Asli women in preserving the culture, language, and beliefs in their community. The data collected for this study were analysed to examine the role of Orang Asli women in the Orang Asli community. The study used a qualitative case study and conducted a semi-structured interview on Orang Asli women. The results of the study showed that the Orang Asli women of Malaysia had significant roles in their community. It is hoped that the findings of the study will elucidate on how indigenous women can contribute their roles in achieving gender equality towards sustainable development in their respective country.

Keyword: Gender equality, Orang Asli women, culture, language, beliefs

Introduction

Gender equality is an issue that has been debated and fought for by the feminist and leftist for decades. The inequality between genders can be seen in many aspects of one's life, for example in health, education, work, and politics. Gender equality means that the different behaviour, aspirations, and needs of women and men are considered, valued, and favoured equally. It does not mean that women and men must become the same but that their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female (International Labour Office, 2000).

This unpleasant truth can be determined from numerous reports done throughout the years. Gender issues commonly impact females rather than the male counterparts due to the cultural and social norm aspects of ones' society (UNESCO, 2019). Economic, environment and social growth should be given equal rights and opportunities for women. They should also be free from any aggression and discrimination. Based on the study by Bayeh (2016), Ethiopia would not have able to achieve sustainable development with only from sole participation of men, unless women are given the empowerment authority and achieved gender equality. In this research, we focus on Orang Asli. 'Orang Asli' is the term which is used in Malaysia for aboriginal or indigenous people living in Malaysia. These Orang Asli are officially classified into three main ethno-linguistic groups, namely Senoi, Proto-Malays, and the Negritos. The groups are comprising of several dialectic sub-groups. Orang Asli communities are clustered in selected states based on their ethnic groups, with the Senoi primarily living in Perak and Pahang. Second, the Proto-Malays lives in Pahang, Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. Lastly, the Negritos mainly lives in Kelantan, Perak and Pahang. According to Mustapha et al. (2010), there were several factors that contributed towards the development of the lives of Orang Asli Youth. They found that the development of the youth caused by these factors: family support, the government agency support (JHEOA) and the insufficient of community chiefs. Indigenous women play many important roles in providing sustainable development for their community. As quoted by Emadi (2002) from Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) "when a man is trained, we have trained an individual, but when a woman is trained, the whole family is trained and therefore we have invested for the future". It is to stress that gender equality is the indicant of sustainable development.

In Malaysia, government officials, business owners, and television itself have conveyed the similar messages of female dependence to men and of Orang Asli cultural inferiority in general (Baer,2006). Male is seen as the superior ones, while the female counterpart is considered as weak. To relate to the previous statement, Orang Asli in general also suffer from the misconception that they are wary of development and rejecting any form of modernised changes. Lye (2005) mentioned that Orang Asli do have to bear with the forced environmental destruction, but they also have welcomed many sorts of changes, such as the new roads developed which started from the 1980s. However, they also still have strong need to preserve their tradition in their community. Orang Asli have their own unique cultures, languages and beliefs that were passed down from their ancestors. Each person has their own role in preserving those traditions from being tainted or eradicated by modernisation. This study is done to identify the roles of Orang Asli women, whether they bear any significance in their own community Thus, it is appropriate to explore the roles of Orang Asli women in Malaysia in terms of preserving their culture, language, and beliefs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the of Orang Asli women in preserving the culture, language, and beliefs in their community. Thus, the objectives of the study are:

1. To investigate the roles of Orang Asli women in preserving the culture in the Orang Asli community in Malaysia
2. To investigate the roles of Orang Asli women in preserving the language in the Orang Asli community in Malaysia.
3. To investigate Orang Asli women roles in preserving the beliefs in the Orang Asli community in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Orang Asli is recognized as original or first peoples in Malaysia. The Orang Asli community consists of eighteen cultures and have different sub-groups (Lin, 2008 as cited in Shah et al., 2018). The population of Orang Asli is represented as less than 1% of the total population of Malaysia of 27 million people. According to Masron, Masami and Ismail (2017), the Orang Asli groups generally distributed under Semang (Negrito), Senoi and Aboriginal Malay (Proto Malay). According to Sharifah Mahsinah (2019), Orang Asli community can be divided into three main groups: Negrito, Senoi and Melayu Proto. Most of them live in the jungles and still practice the traditional ways of living that is influenced largely by the environment and their ancestral practices. Furthermore, their living is closely linked to the natural resources (Shah et al., 2018). Indigenous people are also the possessors of unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs as well as own valuable knowledge of practices for the sustainable management of natural resources. They have special relation to and use of their traditional land. Their inherited land is imperatively importance for their cumulative physical and cultural survival as aboriginals (Masron et al., 2017). Orang Asli men and women play an important role in protecting their culture heritage, language and beliefs.

Culture

The empowerment of the Orang Asli women enable the expansion of their potential through their cultural heritage. Orang Asli traditions are rich in culture that are inherited from generations to another since their ancestors. As for example, the 'Sewang' dance is a tradition that is quite compatible with cultural heritage of the Orang Asli. The Orang Asli women and their sewing dance are inseparable because it ties together all the events that happen in their daily lives (Yahaya & Yahaya, 2014). The Sewang dance is performed for distinct important events, such as deaths, celebrating weddings, celebrating the New Year, celebrating the harvest season, entertaining tourists, and many other occasions. Orang Asli women play an important role in the Sewang dance because all the musicians within the dance are only comprising of women. Through the Sewang dance as well, not only Orang Asli women can present their culture, but also promote their dance while welcoming tourists that come to the village. This is because the dance is already a compulsory event prepared for the tourists when they enter the tourism programs that are offered by the local authority. Apart from that, Orang Asli women would also gain the opportunity to exhibit their skill in playing traditional musical instruments that are made from bamboo, which are used to produce attractive rhythms during the 'Sewang' dance (Yahaya & Yahaya, 2014).

Language

Nevertheless, The Orang Asli is not a homogeneous group. Each tribe has its own language and culture. It perceives itself as different from the others. Linguistically, some of the northern Orang Asli groups (especially the Senoi and Negrito groups) speak languages which currently termed as Aslian languages that suggest a historical link with the indigenous peoples in Burma, Thailand and Indo-China, (Masron et al., 2017). Language is the medium that link people to knowledge and therefore, a community's connection with its history, its culture and tradition and its base of specific knowledge are vanished when a particular language has ceased to exist anymore (Renganathan and Kral, 2018).

The Orang Asli women play an important role in imparting their language within the community. Even though the indigenous are facing a threat of language extinction, they still strive to pass their knowledge and language from one generation to another orally. As for example, the Semai peoples speak Mon-Khmer language which belongs to the Aslian family of languages. Aslian languages are

spoken in areas of Peninsular Malaysia and the southern part of Thailand. According to the Atlas of the World's endangered languages, Semai is categorized as severely endangered (Moseley, 2010; Evans, 2017) and is only spoken by estimation, around 15,000 people. A language that is severely endangered implies that the language is only spoken by the older generations including grandparents; while the parent generation although may understand the language, they do not speak to their children or among themselves anymore (Sumathi et al., 2018). Thus, research is crucial to enhance language revitalization, acquisition, and the uses, among the Semai hence develop pride in their oral and preservation of the cultural traditions. Moreover, the findings of study showed that the Bateq Orang Asli tribes have preferences of their languages even though there is a pattern that a high number of lexical items have been borrowed from Malay (Che Lah, 2014).

Beliefs

Orang Asli women have played a prominent role in the Orang Asli myths and legends. In fact, only a few of Orang Asli writers assumed that every creator, god, spirit, ogre and supernatural animal was male unless they were told otherwise (Baer, Endicott, Gianno, Howell, Nowak & Van der Sluys, 2006). As for example, Temiar people believes their creator is a female. Their shaman, Chingkai dreamt the first human forms were originated from two fruits. In contrast, the Semelai people's belief is that the first man was made from clay, but the first woman was a transformed bird (Baer et al. 2006). Many influential shaman, healers, and elders are women, and they are well known from recent times. One prominent proof showed a notable Semai shaman-healer woman (or 'halaa') died in Sahom, Perak in the 1960s. Another notable Temuan shaman woman was discovered dead in Selangor in the 1990s. To date, few shaman women seem to exist. However, shamans do still exist, mostly among the men. Clearly, the numerous reports of important women in Orang Asli myths and legends give an equitable comparison to the past. Women are indispensable to legends just as in mundane life. Later accumulations of details that followed Christian or Islamic traditions tended to demote women, even for women in supernatural background (Baer et al., 2006). Since the colonial era, world religion such as Islam, Christianity and Bahai have permeate the community in the interior. Today, some members from these communities have begun to accept these religions as their way of life (Masron et al., 2017).

Problem Statement

Indigenous people have the rights to obtain their freedom, prior and informed consent for decisions that affect them, maintain their distinct cultural identities, free from discrimination and having secure access to the lands and resources essential to their well-being and ways. This declaration established a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, well-being, and rights of the world's indigenous peoples. It also addressed both individual and collective rights; cultural rights and identity; rights to education, health, employment, language, and others. It prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples and supports their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own priorities in economic, social, and cultural development. The declaration clearly promotes harmonious and cooperative relations between States and indigenous peoples. Therefore, the indigenous women in Malaysia, also known as Orang Asli women plays an important role in preserving their culture, language, and beliefs in their community regarding their right as accorded in this declaration. The participation of Orang Asli women in protecting their culture, language, and beliefs in their community may be hindered due to modernisation, assimilation, and discrimination (Endicott, 2016).

When a language is extinct, so does the connection to the cultural and historical past of that indigenous tribe. Usually, indigenous culture and history are inherited from one generation to another through oral history and narrative. Without this association to their linguistic and cultural history, these indigenous people will lose their sense of identity and belonging. A research was conducted by Colluzi et al. (2017) on a language use and attitude survey which was carried out in four different Mah Meri villages on Carey Island and the research showed a relatively high degree of endangerment for the languages spoken by the Orang Asli in general, and for the Mah Meri in particular. There are instances where the governments are concerned regarding this issue and offered help to preserve the indigenous language. The Semai language teaching program was implemented in 1998 in Semai schools by Malaysian government in Peninsular Malaysia as part of preserving the minority indigenous language from endangerment (Ghani, 2015).

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative case study as the research design. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the purpose to collect data for the role of Orang Asli women in preserving the culture, language, and beliefs in their community. This method allows the researcher to gather open-ended data, to discover respondent's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about this topic and to investigate profoundly into personal issues. The interview sessions were conducted to eight (8) Orang Asli Women of Semai people who live in Kampung Sungai Odak, Kampung Batu 7 and Kampung Batu 6 at Tapah, Perak, Malaysia. All of them were from rural communities. There were eight Orang Asli women selected in this study. All of respondents were female with the mean age of 42 years old (29-55 years old).

The respondents' professions are inclusive to teacher, cleaner, and janitor in a school, and housewife. Each interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes, with open-ended questions. The interviewees were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clark (2006). Thematic analysis is used to identify and explore emerging patterns and themes. All the audio recordings were listened by the interviewers and verified for the precision of transcription. All data were examined line-by-line, and the main categories and themes were recognized and coded using manual thematic analysis and constant comparison of the data. The data was investigated methodically for all different views to form a rich description of diverse roles and the data were translated into English language. The main researcher coded all data, checked, and discussed the analysis of the data.

The following research questions was formulated for the purpose of the study.

1. What are the roles of Orang Asli women in preserving the culture in the Orang Asli community in Malaysia?
2. What are the roles of Orang Asli women in preserving the language in the Orang Asli community in Malaysia?
3. What are the roles of Orang Asli women in preserving the belief in the Orang Asli community in Malaysia?

Results and Discussion

In general, most of respondents agreed that it is important to preserve culture, language, and belief of Orang Asli community for indigenous cultural and identity security. Orang Asli women play important roles in preserving the culture, language, and belief towards the sustainable development. From the results of manual thematic analysis, there are four emerging themes in this study. The themes are (i) Cultural Acceptance, (ii) Education Protection for the Child, (iii) Decisions and (iv) Work as illustrated in Table 1.

No.	Theme	Example of Evidence
1.	Cultural Acceptance	‘As Orang Asli women.... we need to introduce dan practise ‘Sewang’ dance and handicrafts to preserve the cultural identity in Orang Asli Community’. <i>Respondent 1 (Madam R)</i>
2.	Education Protection for the Child	‘I must talk to our children and family members using ‘Semai’ language at home’. <i>Respondent 3 (Madam S)</i> ‘As a teacher, I teach ‘Semai’ language to students in school.’ <i>Respondent 4 (School teacher)</i>
3.	Decisions	‘Before this, we didn’t believe anything...but now we have various religions, Islam, Christian, Buddha etc.’ <i>Respondent 3 (Madam S)</i>
4.	Work	‘As women, we have to carry duty for finding woods in the forest....to be used to cook for the wedding ceremonies. It is a must for women’. <i>Respondent 1 (Madam R)</i>

Cultural Acceptance

All interviewees considered cultural acceptance as a major aspect in preserving the culture of the Orang Asli community. The roles that they highlighted are handicrafts making and performing ‘Sewang’ dance. The Orang Asli women played their roles not only as housewives, but they also help in generating the money through cultural tourism activities and cultural products. Moreover, they agreed that they should help in promoting the handicrafts and dance to preserve the Orang Asli cultural identity. The results showed that the Orang Asli women do play their roles in preserving their cultural identity in Malaysia.

Education Protection for the Child

All respondents agreed that it is important to use ‘Semai’ language in preserving the language in their community. As a housewife, the Orang Asli women talked to their children using the ‘Semai’ language at home. It is because they want their children to acquire the language from the young

age and promote the language in their community. Furthermore, they communicated with their relatives using the language. As for respondents who are teachers, they used and taught the 'Semai' language in school. They taught the language to the children in school as one of the school subjects that must be learnt by the community. The findings showed that the respondents play their roles as an educator toward their children in preserving the language identity in their community.

Decisions

Based on the theme 'decisions', most of the respondents agreed that it is important to preserve their beliefs and practices in their community. In this aspect, the Orang Asli women believed that they need to practise their beliefs such as their customs in wedding ceremony, wedding feasts and childbirth. The women play the specific roles in these customs and beliefs. For example, after the childbirth, the women are not allowed to step on the ground temporarily. Most of the respondents mentioned that they are free to choose what religions to believe in since there are various religions emerged recently in their community. Thus, the Orang Asli women play their roles as a decider in their community and they are satisfied with that belief.

Work

In terms of 'work' theme, the Orang Asli women agreed that they were involved in improving employment opportunities by providing jobs in tourism. However, most of them said that they were not satisfied with the duty that they carry which is finding woods in the forest for wedding ceremonies. They believed that the duty should be performed by men. This finding showed that the women were not satisfied with the work that they need to do during the ceremonies. Thus, this shows that Orang Asli women can outperform men's duty by producing and selling handicraft activities and introducing and promoting traditional medicines. In this field of entrepreneurship, it is expected that their roles would be able to help in achieving gender equality toward sustainable development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that Orang Asli women are able to contribute their roles in terms of the culture, education, decisions, and work in achieving gender equality toward the sustainable development in this country. The empowerment of Orang Asli women can be seen from the aspect of culture, education, decisions, and work skills which can be promoted into tourism field, education field, management and job field as well as to enhance the economy of the community and the country. The support and encouragement from various agencies and authorities such as The Orang Asli Development Agency (JAKOA) can help Orang Asli women to disclose their talents in producing more outputs from the community. Hence, it will help the Orang Asli women to contribute their roles in achieving gender equality toward the sustainable development goals in the country. Based on the findings of the research, these are some recommendations to be suggested:

1. Orang Asli men should help women in carrying heavy tasks, for example, finding woods for preparation of the ceremony, feasts, or rituals to ensure gender equality.

2. Commercialise products, for example, handicrafts made by women to help in generating their family income.
3. Involve more women in training skills and workshops for gender equality in job opportunities.
4. Provide more opportunities for Orang Asli women to involve in cultural activities as a mean to inculcate the cultural identity reservation.

Acknowledgement

Funding of this research work is generously supported by the LESTARI SDG Triangle Research Grant – Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.

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