

Echoes of Empowerment to Roars of Collective Action: Indigenous Women Redefining Leadership

Asilatul Hanaa Abdullah

Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: asilatul1983@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores Orang Asli women's leadership in Peninsular Malaysia, focusing on how individual empowerment evolves into collective mobilization. The title, "From Echoes of Empowerment to Roars of Collective Action," reflects this journey: early, often subdued voices of empowerment gradually amplify into powerful, organized movements demanding justice and recognition. The purpose of the study is to examine how Orang Asli women leaders promote gender inclusivity, defend customary land, and challenge both state structures and patriarchal norms. Using a qualitative research design, purposive sampling was employed to select Orang Asli women leaders from Semai, Temuan, and Semoq Beri communities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of leadership and activism. Thematic analysis revealed three interrelated themes: (1) the transformation of domestic vigilance into political leadership, (2) the strategic use of maternal frames and cultural values to legitimize activism, and (3) the creation of informal, leaderless networks such as SPNS and JKOASM to sustain community resistance. These findings demonstrate how Orang Asli women redefine leadership as a collective, gender-inclusive practice rooted in cultural survival. The study contributes to broader debates on indigenous rights, feminist leadership, and community mobilization in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Orang Asli, Gender Inclusion, Collective Action, Human Rights

INTRODUCTION

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Indigenous women have led struggle for justice, lands, and cultural survival for many years at the grassroots level. From Asia to the Americas, they are at the center of mobilizing communities, protecting the environment, and fighting inequality. In Malaysia, it is the Orang Asli—mean "original people"—who are Indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, made up of 18 sub-groups that can be categorized into three main groups: Senoi, Semang (Negrito), and Proto-Malay. Despite their small number of people, historically, the Orang Asli encountered marginalization, land alienation, and cultural degradation. Among these people, women became strong leaders, adopting old roles and new activism initiatives. We look at how Orang Asli women transformed their voices of empowering discourses into collective activism for rights and recognition in this article. It is a reflection on leadership of organizations such as Sinui Pak Nanuk Sngik (SPNS) and Network of Orang Asli Villages of Peninsular Malaysia (JKOASM), and it situates their struggles in broader debates over gender, indigeneity, and social justice.

This paper discusses the role of female-led organizations in advocating for the rights of the Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia, emphasizing gender inclusiveness and collective action. Additionally, it examines the complexities of defining and recognizing indigenous peoples in Asia, the impact of colonialism, and the challenges faced by these communities in asserting their rights and preserving their cultural heritage.

It outlines the historical context of indigenous peoples' rights, the impact of colonization, and the ongoing struggles for recognition and self-determination. It addresses the specific challenges faced by indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia, such as the Orang Asli in Malaysia, including land encroachment, exploitation, and neglect. (Official Records of the General Assembly, Sixty-first Session Supplement No. 53 (A/61/53), part one, chap. II, sect. A., 13 September 2007) The lack of legal recognition and protection of their customary lands exacerbates these issues, leading to social injustices and the erosion of cultural identity. UNDRIP, relevant legal frameworks, and case studies of indigenous communities in Southeast Asia. It also examines the role of female-led organizations in advocating for indigenous rights and the impact of national and international policies on these communities. The UNDRIP is a significant framework for recognizing and protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, emphasizing self-determination, cultural preservation, and environmental protection. However, its implementation faces challenges, particularly in Southeast Asia. The document highlights the distinct identity and struggles of indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia, including the Orang Asli in Malaysia. It discusses the challenges they face, such as land rights violations and lack of recognition (The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs and Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, 2010). Female-led organizations like the New Life One Heart Group (SPNS) and the Network of Orang Asli Villages of Peninsular Malaysia (JKOASM) play a crucial role in advocating for the rights of the Orang Asli, emphasizing gender inclusiveness and collective action.

The Orang Asli has a unique and profound relationship with their customary lands, which they view as the lifeline of their community. They consider their customary lands as a source of material and non-material culture, symbolizing their identity and ensuring their survival in a subsistence economy. The Orang Asli inherited these lands from their ancestors and have lived on them for generations, attributing a deep spiritual and cultural significance to the land (Hamzah, 2013). They view the land as a source of pride and seniority, with symbolic and emotional ties, and regard it as a

living entity with a complex of responsibilities towards their kin and departed ancestors. The Orang Asli's customary lands are not only an economic base but also hold cultural and symbolic value, representing a pre-capitalist notion of land. Customary land refers to areas identified by indigenous peoples as their territories, following their customary laws and practices. It includes land used for various purposes such as shelter, agriculture, and rituals, as well as water and other natural resources (Hamzah, 2013). They see customary land as essential to their livelihood and survival, holding sacred value and preserving their history and identity in a subsistence economy. The term "Orang Asli" refers to the original inhabitants of Malaysia. They are divided into three main communities and eighteen sub-communities, each with their own differences in politics, economy, society, and culture. However, they all share a common bond through their customary lands (Hamzah, 2013).

This study discusses the legal and policy frameworks affecting indigenous peoples, including the National Land Code of 1965 with regards Malaysia and the proposed New Orang Asli Land Policy. It highlights the concerns and implications of these policies for the Orang Asli community. The document underscores the importance of recognizing and protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, particularly in Southeast Asia. It calls for the implementation of the UNDRIP principles, the empowerment of indigenous communities through gender-inclusive organizations, and the need for national and international policies to address the historical injustices and ongoing challenges faced by these communities (The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs and Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, 2010).

ROOTED IN HISTORY, BATTLING FOR RIGHTS: THE ORANG ASLI EXPERIENCE

The Orang Asli is divided into three main ethnic groups: Senoi, Semang (Negritos), and Proto-Malay, with each group having distinct sub-groups. The Orang Asli is culturally and linguistically diverse, with each group having unique ways of life and sources of income. Historically, these communities lived in remote rural areas, with their primary sources of income varying from fishing to agriculture and hunting. (JAKOA, 2015; Padzil & Somiah, 2023).

Usually coastal groups such as Orang Laut, Orang Seletar, and Mah Meri depend on fishing activities. Meanwhile, communities such as those from Temuan, Semai and Jakun engaged in permanent agriculture and oversaw their own plantations of cocoa, rubber or oil palm. Furthermore, almost 40% of Orang Asli reside in or near forested areas. This includes the communities of Semai, Temiar, Temuan, Semelai and Semoq Beri, who practice hunting and gathering in addition to swiddening, or the cultivation of hill rice. Some of them also sell crops such as *petai*, *durians*, rattan, and resins. Usually Orang Asli people are led by a male leader known as Tok Batin or head of the village who cooperates with the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JAKOA), the main government body in charge of matters pertaining to this group Orang Asli, a diverse indigenous group in Malaysia, should be understood their historical context, cultural diversity, and the contemporary challenges they face. (JAKOA, 2015; JAKOA, 2021).

The Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JAKOA) was established to improve their socio-economic status while preserving their cultural heritage. JAKOA's initiatives include the Regroupment Planning Scheme (RPS), which aims to reorganize communities and provide basic infrastructure to integrate them into modern society. The government's initiatives, particularly through JAKOA, aim to improve their socio-economic status while preserving their cultural identity. Document, historical data and recent studies to provide an overview of the Orang Asli's socio-economic conditions and the government's interventions (Ab Manaf & Abdullah, 2021).

Despite these efforts, issues such as poverty, declining health and education levels, and land rights conflicts continue to affect the Orang Asli. While the government's efforts through JAKOA have led to some improvements in the lives of the Orang Asli, significant challenges remain. These include socio-economic disparities, health and education issues, and conflicts over land rights (Ab Manaf & Abdullah, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that respects the cultural heritage of the Orang Asli while promoting their socio-economic development. (Nicholas, 2010). The conflicts over land rights with state governments although JAKOA efforts to address these issues, but it also points out that many of these challenges persist due to ingrained prejudices and outdated approaches to managing the "Orang Asli problem (Ab Manaf & Abdullah, 2021). The department sees itself as working to further the interests of the government, which sometimes conflicts with the needs of the Orang Asli communities (Ab Manaf & Abdullah, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative methodology to understand Orang Asli women's leadership practices and contribution to collective action. Data was obtained from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with Network of Orang Asli Villages of Peninsular Malaysia (JKOASM) working committee members and leaders, namely from Semai, Temuan, and Semoq Beri communities of Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang, respectively. Background insights were also obtained from Orang Asli activist involvement in national conferences and grass-root activities at the local level. All interviews were carried out in living rooms and community centers to permit convenience and access. By consent of participants, interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded for identification of repeat themes and subthemes. Participants also assisted to explain specific cultural terms and belief to permit precise interpretation.

Ethics were of central relevance to this study. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were reassured of their right to withdraw at any stage of time. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were initially suggested; however, most respondents chose to use their real names because they were already known publicly for their activism and leadership positions in society. The study conformed to ethics requirements by ensuring that participant autonomy was upheld, cultural sensibilities respected, and knowledge disseminated was rooted in knowledge from the communities themselves.

THE DILEMMA

The Orang Asli is very much aware of their future that they academically, socially and culturally lag behind compared to other ethnicities in Malaysia and that their survival depends on the Federal government or JAKOA (Idrus, 2011; Nicholas, Engi & Teh, 2010). Similarly, they realized they have to stand on their own in order to change their future. They are also aware that part of their responsibility is to protect their well being and their cultural identity so that they can pass it on to future generations (Tijah Yok Chopil, 2018). The spirit to make a change became one of the reasons for them to keep alive, unlike before, all that they thought was to live and mingle among their communities.

In a novel way, JKOASM adopted a more feminist and female-led strategy in order to engage, empower, and embrace their local communities. But that didn't mean they avoided participating in protests. To stop logging firms from invading their ancestral land and preventing deforestation, JKOASM members and supporters established human blockades in every state where they had branches, with the exception of Selangor. They so voiced their displeasure with encroachment and logging operations, which have a negative impact on both the forests and their way of life. OA villagers were not as knowledgeable about basic rights as other Malaysian residents who were not Orang Asli, and they were also not as aware of safe protesting techniques as they are now (Padzil & Somiah, 2023). The latter had allowed the former. When Tijah Yok Chopil, a female Orang Asli leader, created JKOASM in 2008, it garnered a lot of attention because it was successful in bringing different groups together, especially when it came to the fight to protect their customary land. Given that land is a recurring element in Orang Asli disputes, a more thorough explanation of this concept is warranted. Indigenous customary land rights or titles are typically recognised and upheld by community members and are derived from the authority of traditional norms and customary laws (Padzil & Somiah, 2023).

WHISPERS TO WAVES: THE RISE OF OA WOMEN'S INFORMAL MOVEMENTS

Differing from most mainstream Malaysian women's groups, Orang Asli women began to mobilize in small, unofficial groups that would allow them to speak, to gather, and to raise community concerns in safe places (Tijah Yok Chopil, 2018). It was these unofficial gatherings that ultimately became collective action and enabled women to move from the "whispers" of private discourse to the "waves" of outspoken protest. This process represents transformational leadership, of Carli's (2003) account—a leadership that draws on self-awareness, vision, and shared direction, not on formal power. Orang Asli women leaders did exactly that by mobilizing their people to stand for traditional territories, to defend human rights, and to think about leadership in a manner that transcended the male ascendancy of the hierarchy of the Tok Batin. In doing all that, they challenged patriarchal customs and state authority.

Collective action, Evans and Nambiar (2013) remind us, grows from common problems and purposes. For Orang Asli women, it involved converting close circles of mothers, sisters, and neighbors into strong grassroots networks. Political but also social

venues, these networks were ones in which women planned, formed solidarity, and supported each other. Sometimes they used mother frames cultural norms of women as caregivers and protectants to defend their activism. By portraying themselves as caregivers protecting land for their children's future, they established wider community support and reduced opposition from male colleagues (Goss et al., 2010).

However, such a transformation was not without challenges. Some of these male leaders, like Tok Batin, saw women's mobilizing efforts to be a direct challenge to their own leadership roles. Gossip spread that women wanted to "replace" men as heads, further entrenching patriarchal insecurities. Financial means were also lacking, together with childcare responsibilities and restricted access to mainstream education, creating substantial impediments to women's continued participation. In spite of these hindrances, Orang Asli women did not give up. Their capacity to draw upon collective action from below, with support from younger cohorts and supportive male champions, ultimately turned "whispers" of opposition into "waves" of popular empowerment.

FROM WHISPERS TO NETWORKS: INFORMAL COLLECTIVE ACTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

The rise of the Network of Orang Asli Villages of Peninsular Malaysia (JKOASM) was a seminal moment for Indigenous grass-roots activism. Established in 2008 by Tijah Yok Chopil, JKOASM became a movement that championed customary land rights and supported gender-inclusive leadership. What was different about JKOASM was its "leaderless" nature—a decentralized system that refuses to impose hard hierarchies. It's not that leadership is absent but that hard, top-down authority is rejected. In contrast to conventional leadership by the Tok Batin, often male and state-officiated, JKOASM functions through shared responsibility and consensus decision-making. This system gives space to women, who would otherwise be marginalized, to move to prominent spheres of coordination, advocacy, and decision-making (Padzil & Somiah, 2023).

Informality was one of JKOASM's most unique identity characteristics. In Malaysia, establishing a formal collective action demands registration with Registry of Societies (ROS) under the Societies Act of 1966, or with the Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM) under the Companies Act of 1965. It is a complex process that demands an original name, a constitution, a minimum of seven founding members, and

formal approval of office bearers. Even though ROS offers a relatively less complex avenue, both ROS and CCM demand strict compliance with auditing, reporting, and financial regulations. It is a costly and time-consuming process that many Indigenous organizations cannot afford to maintain. Accordingly, few organizations were delisted, leaving Orang Asli activists with no other option than to utilize informal and community-centered arrangements to maintain continuity (Nah, 2008). In short, JKOASM's "leaderless" and unofficial structure was both a mode of necessity and resistance to state initiatives to control Indigenous mobilizing.

Consciousness-raising became the focus of such a tactic. Women leaders, especially from among the Semai, Temuan, and Semoq Beri, set up workshops, dialogues, and blockages that dwelled upon the importance of land for cultural endurance. In JKOASM's mobilization of locals to challenge logging and durian plantation schemes in Kelantan, for instance, Abdullah (2018) narrates how peripheral complaints would be convected to collective opposition. These initiatives also brought to light resistance from inside and outside. Some of these men from the Tok Batin and Orang Asli saw JKOASM as being "illegal" or "anti-development" and grouped together with the governing bodies (Lela & Juli, 2019). Speculation spread that women leaders were out to challenge men's authority, demonstrating fears of changing gender roles. These conflicts underscore both of these women activist's double burdens: they fought external forces of land dispossession, but they also had to negotiate cultural legitimacy from their own people.

ORANG ASLI EMPOWERMENT: LEADING CHANGE THROUGH AWARENESS

In spite of these challenges, JKOASM's women leaders recast activism not as opposition to men's control but as collective fighting for the survival of communities. By calling upon responsibility towards motherhood to safeguard land and future generations, they earned legitimacy and expanded support bases. In merging feminist tactic with Indigenous values, Orang Asli women reshaped leadership from their own communities' perspectives. Consciousness-raising was therefore a combination of political resistance and cultural negotiation that allowed for women to assert their voices while enhancing collective agency.

The history of Orang Asli women's leadership is traced back to the establishment of Sinui Pak Nanuk Sngik (SPNS), or "One Heart New Life," in 1995. Organized as protest against male-dominated leadership, SPNS was a venue where Orang Asli women—most especially mothers—became accountable for the future of their people. They organized open informal education, educated children in reading and traditional songs, and imparted values of cultural conservation. These grassroots movements illustrate how empowerment typically begins not with political protests but with everyday practices of pedagogy and care, which cumulatively developed a collective political consciousness (Tijah Yok Chopil, 2019).

Women's empowerment was also founded on their daily existence in the village. Orang Asli women who stayed home were most likely to be the first to notice the entry of developers, loggers, or surveyors into the villages. They promptly relayed the message to their husbands, who relayed it to the Tok Batin. Such heightened awareness demonstrates that women's leadership transcends outside spaces but also occurs in private spheres, challenging conventional gender roles. Systematic cooperation between men and women picked up, as new generations also participated in the struggle for communal land rights (Juli, 2019).

Capacity-building was also strengthened through workshops, legal training, and NGO partnerships. With the help of institutions such as the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC), EMPOWER Malaysia, and the All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Orang Asli women raised their rights awareness and practiced knowledge such as land mapping through GPS technology (Murni & Nora, 2019). These workshops helped them understand that resistance is not merely about short-term threat but also long-term heritage of land as a means of life. As one Temuan youth leader from Negeri Sembilan explained, the forest is not just livelihood—people's medicine, fresh air, spiritual heritage, and connection with ancestors. To her, "without land, life would have no meaning."

Paralegal training was particularly life-changing. With the assistance of JKOASM male allies, women activists were encouraged to equip themselves with legal awareness in order to defend their communities in court cases and negotiations. This is what Carli (2003) calls transformational leadership—leadership through self-awareness, vision, and the ability to mobilize collective action. It is also a rejection of conventional wisdom that women's domain was the home. In the present times, women Orang Asli

engage actively in blockades, confront state representatives, and speak on national platforms.

These developments underscore the shift of gender attitudes among Orang Asli individuals. Women who were earlier relegated to domestic spheres are increasingly being recognized as rightful leaders and custodians of land. In support of this, Goss et. al. (2010) argue, drawing on maternal responsibility—something they refer to as maternal frames—allows women to articulate their activism as a prolongation of mothering. Orang Asli women used this paradigm to rally support for their cause, demonstrating that empowerment through knowledge is not only about personal growth but about intergenerational justice and group survival.

Nowadays, The Orang Asli people are more active compared to the previous generation the previous generation were not organized or bold enough to form a movement against the government. The new generation of Orang Asli are more aware of their rights and brave enough to express their feelings openly. This awareness led them to gather their people to work hand in hand not only in expressing their dissatisfaction by showing protest but by interacting with the federal and state government. Other than that, they have an annual meeting to discuss customary land matters and any issues relating to the Orang Asli community.

The development of contemporary leadership among Orang Asli people started with the formation of women's leadership which originated from the awareness shared by their ancestors. An organization for women called Sinui Pak, Nanuk Sngik or famously known as SPNS was established in 1995 due to the frustration they had for the Orang Asli community since men led their groups. It is known to them that the men lack the motivation to lead and solve the problems in a creative manner. SPNS also popularly known as "New Life One Heart" existed as a symbol of solidarity among Orang Asli especially the mothers to ensure a brighter future for the young generation and also meant to improve the life of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. The people behind this SPNS are really committed, passionate and willing to sacrifice their time, energy and money to upbringing the children since there are children who could not attend school due to having no financial resources. The leaders also took initiative to teach the children on their own so that they won't be left behind. One of the leaders also set up a kindergarten in her village for this purpose. An informal education such as learning how to do basic things like read, write, and sing the Semai song was initiated

by this leader. This way, the Orang Asli are able to express their feelings and this serves as part of their connection with nature. The highlights of this activity was to emphasize on the sense of detachment and loss experienced in the relationship when access to and conservation of the forest are restricted. Unfortunately, the situation becomes more complicated since the land and forest are continuously intruded and taken over in the name of development even in the 21st century. This leader was criticized in the beginning saying that she has badwill to show off and against the gender norms in the Orang Asli community, however after several years, she gained support from the youngsters (former students of her kindergarten). This support ignites her spirit to overcome her frustrations towards the Orang Asli community (Tijah Yok Chopil 2019).

The spirit they have was illustrated in a song entitled “don't sleep now”, usually being taught to the children about the importance of appreciating time and not to waste it as they have not much time left to change their community's life. The song can be further portrayed and translated as below;

Uge butbet mase adeh

Mase singkat pek betempat

Mai chak canak ente sedap

Hi chak canak ente empoit Mai gui pekan hi gui darat Susah hi pek bi pani

Hi neng neng lout teow mat bijot Hi neng darat hi la bitod

Ku melog hi gui ru hi ha bet...

Time is short—we've no shelter

Everyone else's rice dishes are delicious

We eat rice with salt

Other people live in towns, we inhabit the forest No one knows about our hardship

We look to the hills, we weep

We turn to the forest, it's burning

Where can we live, with whom shall we sleep ...)

(Zawawi, 2007)

They were expecting a more forthright approach from their leader to advocate for a change in government to preserve the rights of Orang Asli, as well as songs composed by the leader in their local Semai in terms of ancestral land and stopping logging. The song also is composed by using easy lyrics, making it easy to understand and remember. The song acts like an alarm clock that if there is no action being taken from now, their fate will never change. In one of the stanzas, it can be seen as if they relied too much on other people, they will diminish by time because nobody cares about

their difficulties and it is not possible for their inhabitants to be destroyed if they did not fight for their rights.

BUILDING BRIDGES: ORANG ASLI LEADERSHIP THROUGH MEETINGS AND TRAININGS

Subsequently, the female leader began to address these concerns with a group of mothers' who participated in their children's learning sessions at her residence. Alongside composing songs for the children, they even managed to organize a few workshops on basket weavings as a way to improve their economic capacity by selling these baskets. Later, with the support of the NGOs, they underwent paralegal training regarding their rights on land matters. A fulfilling moment occurred when many youngsters from Kampung Chang, including some of her former students who grew into adolescence, and most of them were aware of the issues of oppression faced by the Orang Asli in the Peninsular. In this informal education, the teacher which is Orang Asli too instilled values and love for the forest and Orang Asli culture. At the same time, their allies from the Temiar ethnic group, from Kampung Sebir, Negeri Sembilan, were actively documenting the struggles of the Orang Asli in Negeri Sembilan. A collaboration between Malaysian Care, a NGO body which also assisted the Orang Asli community in Pahang. Through discussions with the Orang Asli community in Pahang, they found that the issues faced by the Orang Asli in the Peninsular were almost similar. Therefore, they also offered legal workshop training, and learned about the rights of the indigenous people including those from Sabah and Sarawak. As a result, the culture of teaching and discussions from SPNS spread to other villages, which later caused it to receive more support from Orang Asli villages. Recently, they received moral support from the four states across Peninsular Malaysia. The female SPNS activists successfully gained approval from their husbands and young boys to attend meetings. In fact, young mothers usually brought together their children and husbands to listen about the issues and problems faced by the Orang Asli across all the villages. It was during this period that support for this organization gained popularity and established itself within the Orang Asli village community, predominantly led by female leaders. With the initial moral support, the Orang Asli from villages in the four Peninsular states namely Perak, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, and Kelantan agreed to establish a grassroots movement known as the Network of Orang Asli Villages Peninsular Malaysia (JKOASM). This movement has its functions to actively promote the involvement of Orang Asli women and youth in politics and social development. Simultaneously, the leaders of JKOASM

also emphasized on the importance of gaining moral support and participation from men to empower women. These female leaders believed that without this support, all of their efforts would be meaningless. As of today, SPNS no longer exists and is replaced by JKOASM. All of these personal experiences led them to bring this into a collective organization to a larger political movement. These womens' sit together, develop a slogan, political philosophy, and solidite to realise this movement. They emphasised that they may overcome internalised oppression by forming a sense of power within and power along, gaining the confidence and resilience needed to pursue their goals and oppose injustice (Tijah Yok Chopil, 2018).

DISCUSSION: FROM VIGILANCE TO LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION

The leadership of Orang Asli women has evolved through a gradual but profound process beginning in the private sphere and being carried over to collective, public action. Their lives illustrate a continuum: from the day-to-day vigilance within the domestic sphere, through consciousness-raising via education and workshops, to overt resistance to external threats, and finally to the redefinition of gender roles and leadership structures in their communities. This chapter traces that trajectory, pointing out how Orang Asli women transformed domestic roles into political activism, challenged patriarchal expectations, and renegotiated leadership in the name of collective survival.

For many Orang Asli women, activism began not on protest lines but at home. Women who stayed in the village were often the first to notice the presence of developers, loggers, or surveyors in community lands. They watched for suspicious behavior, gathered information, and passed it on to their husbands, who passed it on to the Tok Batin. What appears to be a domestic task was in fact an early form of political vigilance. Women blurred lines between the domestic and the political as they used their positionality within the home to monitor intrusion.

This vigilance was a quiet but significant shift in gender roles. As Juli (2019) observes, the day-to-day attentiveness of Orang Asli women set the stage for greater participation in community organizing. Their experience demonstrates that leadership must not always begin from a place of authoritative acknowledgment but can be born out of everyday acts of care and responsibility. Women's presence in the home, in this manner, became a critical element of community defense, transforming leadership from

within its definition. The second wave of women's empowerment was through grassroots education and collective conscientization. In 1995, Orang Asli women formed Sinui Pak Nanuk Sngik (SPNS, "New Life One Heart"), a women's organization created out of frustration with male leadership hegemony. SPNS offered a platform where mothers and caregivers could dictate their children's destinies. Women taught literacy, preserved oral traditions, and passed on cultural values, turning everyday acts of teaching into political action (Tijah Yok Chopil, 2019).

Cultural production was also a key method of consciousness-raising. Songs such as "Don't Sleep Now" were used to call on youth to remain vigilant and to combat complacency, inscribing political lessons into popular cultural forms (Zawawi, 2007). By anchoring tradition in activism, Orang Asli women rendered culture a tool of resistance. These efforts were furthered through collaborations with NGOs. Organizations such as the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC), EMPOWER Malaysia, and the All Women's Action Society (AWAM) held workshops in women's rights, human rights, and land law. These collaborations provided women with valuable tools: legal literacy, paralegal training, and technical skills like GPS land mapping (Murni & Nora, 2019). Significantly, the workshops were not isolated events. Women returned to their villages and taught others what they learned, creating a cycle of intergenerational empowerment.

As one of the Temuan youth leaders from Negeri Sembilan narrated, the forest was more than economic livelihood it was identity, spirituality, and life. In her words, "without land, life would have no meaning" (Murni & Nora, 2019, p. 82). These testimonies illustrate how workshops amplified not only legal consciousness but also cultural consciousness, reinforcing the indivisibility of land, life, and identity.

These pillars of awareness and vigilance were directed towards overt resistance. In 2008, Orang Asli women were among the co-founders of the Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli SeMalaysia (JKOASM), a national Indigenous network that was the hub of grassroots mobilization. Unlike the traditional Tok Batin leadership that is male and state-recognized, JKOASM adopted a leaderless movement based on consensus and shared responsibility. This decentralized structure offered a way for women to step forward as coordinators, advocates, and negotiators. As Padzil and Somiah (2023, p. 10) put it, JKOASM was "a leaderless resistance that thrived on shared responsibility rather than formal authority."

JKOASM was also strategic in its informality. Formal registration of a movement with the Registry of Societies (ROS) or Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM) involved onerous processes, constitutions, and costly adherence to auditing and reporting requirements. Many Indigenous organizations that were registered formally were later deregistered for failure to meet these bureaucratic requirements (Nah, 2008). JKOASM therefore operated outside these rigid structures, with informality being both a necessity and a political strategy for survival.

Women leaders spearheaded open acts of resistance. In 2018, more than 800 Orang Asli villagers, women, and youths set up blockades in Gua Musang, Kelantan, to protest against logging and durian plantation plans (Abdullah, 2018). Women also participated in demonstrations, carried banners, and faced government authorities. These protest actions were not only oppositional but were guided by cultural values. Women articulated land as "life itself"—a source of breath, medicine, and ancestral connection. By articulating land as survival, women reframed resistance as a moral imperative to safeguard people and environment.

The most transformative outcome of these processes is arguably the redefinition of leadership itself. The Tok Batin system historically reserved leadership for men, and patriarchal norms confined women to the home. Women activists were initially met with suspicion, if not hostility. Lela and Juli (2019, p. 51) report that there were rumors circulating that Orang Asli women "planned to take over men's leadership and prove that they are better leaders." These responses attest to anxieties about shifting gender roles within Indigenous society.

Women persevered in the face of these cultural challenges. Men allies in JKOASM urged women to go for paralegal training because they understood that gender-inclusive leadership was necessary for effective advocacy. Leadership was reframed as a collective responsibility rather than a competition. Women themselves employed maternal frames to authorize activism. As Goss et al. (2010, p. 32) argue, maternal framing "draws strength from socially recognized roles as caregivers and protectors." By couching activism in terms of an extension of maternal duty—protecting land for children and future generations—women diminished opposition and gained broader legitimacy.

At the same time, Orang Asli women's activism also exhibits what Carli (2003) defines as transformational leadership: leadership founded upon vision, self-knowledge, and the ability to inspire others towards collective goals. In mobilizing the youth, balancing caregiving and public advocacy, and translating cultural values into political action, women embodied transformational leadership in practice. Through these strategies, the Orang Asli women reconceptualized leadership from within. No longer confined to domestic roles, they became accepted as decision-making leaders, negotiators, and custodians of communal survival. Through their activism, they illustrate that leadership is not solely an issue of authority or hierarchy but of courage, persistence, and responsibility across genders and generations.

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Even if Orang Asli women have been spearheading collective action, their leadership has not gone without any challenges. Apart from state repression and corporate land appropriation, women also face cultural and societal opposition from their own communities. Patriarchal ideologies have traditionally placed men—specifically, the Tok Batin—firmly in their position as the one and only true leaders who are accepted by both the society and the state. Women activists who entered the public arena were generally accused of creating social upheaval or trespassing on cultural frontiers. Lela and Juli (2019, p. 51) reported that there were suspicions that Orang Asli women "planned to acquire men's leadership and demonstrate that they are better leaders." Such suspicions created suspicion and occasionally undermined village unity.

Practical limitations further complicated women's activism. Child care and subsistence labor limited their time for organizing. Lower literacy rates and reduced access to formal education also limited women's participation in legal and bureaucratic activities, placing them at a disadvantage compared to male peers. At the same time, these constraints also show the force of women's strategy. By framing their activism as an expansion of motherly duty, women legitimated their leadership in language that was culturally relevant. As Goss et al. (2010, p. 32) argue, framing by mothers allows women to "draw strength from socially recognized roles as caregivers and protectors." Citing such a role by the Orang Asli women facilitated them to overcome patriarchal suspicion and mobilize community solidarity.

Bureaucratic barriers also presented enormous obstacles. Establishing an official collective involves registration with the Registry of Societies (ROS) or the Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM). These are complex, costly, and subject to strict financial reporting. Most Indigenous organizations failed to uphold legal recognition and ended up being deregistered (Nah, 2008). To avoid such weaknesses, JKOASM deliberately adopted an informal, consensus-based approach. As argued by Padzil and Somiah (2023, p. 10), this "leaderless resistance" endured all the more because of its absence of rigid authority or vulnerable to bureaucratic dismemberment.

These problems show that leadership among women is not merely a case of filling the space left by male leaders but of remaking the definition of leadership among Orang Asli society itself. Through overcoming external marginalization and internal patriarchal resistance, Orang Asli women emerged as key leaders in the struggle for rights, survival, and self-determination.

CONCLUSION

Over the last few decades, the Orang Asli have been exploited and manipulated by several entities including capitalists and elites. Despite the fact that the federal and state governments have jurisdiction over these issues, however they have largely failed to prevent these violations and have neglected the well being of the Orang Asli and violated their rights. In response, the community banded together and mobilised to fight for their rights collectively. They were severely impacted when their cultural identity began to fade, and basic necessities like the access to education, right to receive proper treatment in sickness and right to basic safety structure for women is being denied. The alliance? between JKOASM and other Orang Asli movements in Peninsular Malaysia headed by women serves as a reminder that Orang Asli women are deserving and capable of leadership roles and can inspire members of their community to work towards a stable, sustainable, and prosperous ecosystem. Most importantly, their ultimate concern is to defend their cultural and traditional heritage. JKSOAM suggested that the collaboration with other social organizations can promote gender inclusiveness, and increase women's collective influence, especially for Orang Asli women's. The two essential elements in achieving this is by fostering trust and support for Orang Asli women's to facilitate collective action. The result of this consciousness about women's rights and related issues to it will create a strong bond which encourages women's empowerment in politics were seen in their capabilities of raising consciousness groups,

promoting awareness, and organising meetings and training for the benefit of Orang Asli community.

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