

# Gender Struggle: What Can We Learn from the Dayak Benawan Women?

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Received: January 5, 2020

Revised: March 13, 2020

Accepted: April 13, 2020

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### Abstract

This research centres on gender inequities practiced against indigenous women of the Dayaks Benawan in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The activities of Dayak Benawan women are principally with farming, gardening, and any other activity to earn a living do rely on nature. Dayak Benawan women are socially positioned as a complement to the male, in family, traditional institutions, and village institutions. The lack of access for women to be the determinant of the direction of policy impact on the structure of the gender division of labor that is not fair. This study uses feminist ethnographic research methods. The field data collection techniques include interview, observation, and participants lives in a Dayak Benawan Community. The data was collected and was categorized by confirming with the informant. The collection of data was also in the form of secondary data from various sources such as reference books, documents from the office of the village, and scientific journals. The results of this study revealed that the position of Dayak Benawan women

role in the domestic sector, in the social structure. While the position of men became the key to the community structure, such as the family, traditional institutions, and government agencies in the village. The existence of a gender division of labor occurs due to the persistence of local traditions in their society. The enactment of local traditions indicated the weakening of the position of women politically. It also reveals the perpetuation of the culture of patriarchy in the Dayak Benawan community. Thus, in various policy sectors, women are never involved. Such as the family, traditional institutions, and government agencies in the village. The existence of a gender division of labor that occurs due to the persistence of local traditions believed by society. The enactment of local tradition indicates the weakening of the position of women politically. It is also a perpetuation of the culture of patriarchy on the Dayak Benawan community. Thus, in various policy sectors, women are never involved. Such as in the family, traditional institutions, and government agencies in the village. The existence of a gender division of labor occurs due to the persistence of local traditions believed within this society. Still, the enactment of local tradition indicated the weakening of the position of women politically. It is also a perpetuation of the culture of patriarchy on the Dayak Benawan community. Thus, in various policy sectors, women were never involved.

**Keywords:** Women, Dayak Benawan, Social Structure, Gender, Indigenous People

## Introduction

Women in indigenous communities worldwide are one of the most marginalized groups, discrimination not only based on sex and race but also based on culture and class. Native women are the group most vulnerable to various types of violence, such as economic violence, culture, and structure (Ramsay, 2009; United Nations, 2010). Dayaks are natives who inhabited the island of Borneo centuries ago. The '*Dayak*' initially used to refer to the original inhabitants in the interior of the island of Borneo, Indonesia. Uniquely to distinguish it from the coastal communities in general embraced the religion of Islam. Moreover, the term refers not only to the Dayak ethnic group or tribe but instead focuses on socio-religious aspects (Hidayah, 2015).

Dayak Benawan is among the Dayak sub-tribes living in the village Cowet, Sanggau District, West Kalimantan, Indonesia along with the Malays and Dayaks Benawan. Dayak Benawan tribes refer to themselves as '*people of Benawan*' which is a declaration that they are the Dayak Benawan tribes (Niko, 2018).

Benawan people live in groups in the township in the Cowet village territory that is scattered in several villages between Pejalu village, Bangang village, Munguk Tawak village, Cuet village, Dusun village, Munguk Mayang village, and Sei Borok village.

At first, women referring to one of human sex, but later became a distinguishing feature of existence: from the life of animals, plants, culture, cosmology, to mythology (Muhtadin, 2008). Then, humans and the environment eventually split into two: the majority were classified as female and partly classified as male. Two groups of men and women were

then attributed as feminine and masculine on the heteronormative culture (Butler, 1999).

Furthermore, Banda and Chinkin (2004) state that members of minority groups and indigenous peoples suffer discrimination or unequal treatment, based on various factors, including race, nationality, religion, age, disability, and ethnicity. Women are discriminated against because of gender, as well as their statuses, such as a married, widows or mothers. Therefore, the launch feminist theory consideration for specificities or differences between women, usually based on biological attributes and capacities, and equality between men and women in terms of gender equality demands (Ford and Parker, 2008).

The study of gender inequality is not new. Discussions, descriptions of previous studies of gender inequality indicate that gender inequality occurs in every structure of society (Orloff, 1996; Hansatit, 2014; Hoque, 2015; Surbakti & Devasahayam, 2015; Sridadi & Prihantono, 2018).

In each of the studies analyzed critically about gender marginalization in society, where women experience marginalization and discrimination in a variety of structures. This study aims to describe or recount the experience and knowledge of gender struggle in Dayak Benawan women in their socio-economic structure.

Cultural values that distinguish the roles of men and women in social reality can be found in many cultures, as the basis of social organizations, religious teachings, myths, symbols, and other social practices (Abdullah, 2015). *Gender, poverty, and indigenous peoples are a significant pillar of global climate policy objectives (Climate and Development Knowledge Network, 2019). This means that the Dayak*

*Benawan community has a significant contribution in caring for nature, which has a direct impact on climate change, today. Local knowledge and contributions of Dayak Benawan women should be a milestone in the sustainable management of natural ecosystems.*

Inequality occurs between the access of men and women in gaining access to scarce resources. This is a source of injustice. Essential resources that include the mastery of material goods, services provided by others, prestige, a decisive role, the time freely, food and medical care, personal autonomy, opportunities for education and training as well as freedom from coercion or physical punishment.

Brunt (1992) states that the strategies men and women use are then embedded in the texture of social relations and symbolic order. This means that the relationship and this command enables and limits the ability of the various categories of social actors to create a space to express themselves. In this case that indigenous women are constrained in all fields.

The manifestation of gender inequality occurs at various levels of the structure (King & Wilder, 2012 according to Mosse, 2007), The most potent ideology in favor of gender differences in the division of the world into a public and a private area generally state that the male public and private women. Furthermore, he explained that there was indeed a female individual who enters the public domain, but everywhere there are no women as a group to exercise power and influence in the public sphere in the same way as was done by men. He also added that the ethnic, class and religion allows holding a significant role in deciding which man will run the power.

In all parts of the world, indigenous women's voices, values, experience, and knowledge were not given a decisive expression in the context of the development of local communities (Roy 2004; Banda & Chinkin, 2004). It means that women are still not seen as part of policy making. This study aims to describe or recount how Dayak Benawan women survive in experience and knowledge of gender struggle?

## Method

The method used in this study is a feminist ethnographic research method. Feminist ethnography is the process to represent and document experiences women have in producing knowledge of the culture, oppression, and responsibility in the community or society (Schrock, 2013). Then, McNamara (2009) explains that feminist ethnography to make room for giving women a voice in the event explores existing experience and wisdom. Feminist ethnography itself is defined as still very common so that it can be applied to research with a multidisciplinary approach (Visweswaran, 1997; McNamara, 2009; Schrock, 2013).

This study uses ethnographic data collection techniques, observation, interview, documentation study, and living with the community to obtain timely and accurate information. This method is in line with the opinion of Williams (1995), which asserts that ethnography was designed to explore how one interprets world experiences. The steps to be taken to obtain data for the continuity of this research, ie, field studies, and literature. It means that technique field data collection by interview and observation.

In the field, the researcher interviewed five Dayak Benawan women, with the following criteria: (a) comes from a family Dayak Benawan (*suku asli*); (b) the informant knowing and experiencing injustice in their family; (c) the informant was married. With their diverse informants, the researcher used triangulation techniques informants in data retrieval. Data was collected and categorized, then confirmed again with the informant. In addition to primary data, the researcher is also equipped with secondary data from various sources such as reference books, documents from the office of the village, and scientific journals. Documentation is also collected in the field of research in the form of photographs.

This study gives the researcher experience in the field data collection, with feminist ethnographic methods. The data analysis was carried out simultaneously with the process of collecting data and information while in the field. Data collected in the form of field notes are sorted out in the form of text, charts/schemes, tables and images.

## Result and Discussion

### **Dayak Benawan Woman: Inequality of Opportunity**

This research was conducted in the area of Dayak Benawan in District Balai, Sanggau District, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Subdistrict Hall is a village inhabited by the majority of the Dayak people, that including the sub-Dayak Benawan. Besides, Dayak Benawan in indigenous territories also coexists with Dayak Mali tribes and ethnic Malays.

Dayak Benawan tribe settled along the rural area in District Balai, Sanggau District, West Kalimantan. There are more than 3,000 people who



dwelt in the village of Cowet; 95% of the population are ethnic Dayak Benawan, and 5% are Malays (Data of Cowet Village Monograph, 2016). Dayak Benawan, not many women who are leaders in the public sphere are in the village administration. In the village, only one woman had entered the village government structure, serving as staff BPD or the village council (Data of Cowet village Monograph, 2016).

In this study, the researcher lived with the Dayak Benawan community life in the Cowet village for more than one month. Dayak Benawan women get up earlier than roosters crowing. They draw water, preparing food for their husband and their children before they set off into the woods and fields to work; to earn a living. They set out to rice fields and rubber plantations before sunrise. They earn a living by tapping rubber trees, then they go to the fields and search for wooden branches to bring home for their cooking.

They return from the forest before noon, in order to prepare lunch for the family and to do the household cleaning. In the middle of the day, (after noon) they relax and tell stories with others. Dayak Benawan women go to the fields together with their neighbors. They return before 5 pm in order to prepare dinner for their families. So every day to continue with the same work. It has also become a role model for their children in order to help their parents. From an early age, both men and women of Dayak, in everyday life, the nature surrounding the introduction of our lives is a top priority.

The double burden that Dayak Benawan women have, has already become commonplace for them. Culture and customs they have been handed down from their ancestors since time immemorial, so no problem

at all if they also work as wage earners. They do not call it a double burden, but it is the duty of a woman or wife. Their social life was never questioned; a double workload is accepted by women; - as housewives as well as breadwinners. There will be gossip if there are women who do not work in the fields.

These poor conditions force women to surrender to Dayak Benawan traditions, in this circle of poverty so that they do not get access to a good education. The economic condition is the reason for this situation, but it is as if without a solution. The women in the village of Cowet decide to manage the household, raising pigs and manage the farm. Dayak Benawan womens decisions are a result of their resignation to their social situation - poverty shackles them. Many Dayak Benawan women in this village are illiterate.

Based on research observations in the field, The researcher shows that Dayak women in Cowet village territory have only graduated from elementary school. If any, who finished school to high school means comes from a family wealthy enough. No Junior High School and High School in the village of Cowet, only in the capital district, located about 4.5 kilometers by road passing through forests and villages. In addition to the limitations of school fees, the distance between village and sub-district is also the reason they do not continue their education to a higher level. Dayak Benawan in Cowet village, on average attend primary school, and then work in the city and get married.

Dayak Benawan community confidence that the forest as a dwelling house and a place of life must be guarded and maintained. Therefore, it is not rare among people who stayed in the woods or fields

far from the village to just mingle with nature. Usually, they spend the night at the family farm when the paddy fields have started to turn yellow. The Dayak Benawan tribe is a tribal society that is still farming by moving from one forest to another forest. Since the 1990s, the Dayak Benawan already established forests and can't open as a farm, and this is to protect the forest to keep Dayak Benawan women mostly work as farm laborers.

Various problems faced by women in the village Cowet, based on observation data: The researcher found that the people in the Cowet village still suffer from poor access to public services; they do not yet have access to electricity, the villages are far from the center of the health service, and they have limited access to clean water. Limitations of road infrastructure have also resulted in difficulties with access to the capital. This situation is a barrier for Dayak Benawan women in the village of Cowet. They have poor access to public services, such as; education, social services, and health services.

The Dayak Benawan community in Cowet village work as farming communities with farming intensity as much as two times a year. In this work, the women are the main actors in the field activities. On this farm the man/husband is the main determinant in the decision to open old farmland. While the woman acts as a companion. However, after the land is cleared, the woman will be the person who completes the intense work in the fields. Starting from participating in logging and then burning, until the ani-ani reap rice.

This type of work in the fields is done together, both women and men. Men cut down large trees, hauling wood sticks that remains when burnt and make dio umek in the middle of the field. While women work

felling trees of small size, cutting grass, planting rice, rice waiting when yellowed, and reap the *ani-ani*. In this type of male or female will determine what they will do in the fields.

Farming is a part of the culture of the Dayak Benawan for continuity and sustainability. The concept of farming that does still apply fields to move. This philosophy was intended; it relies on the natural because without the natural result will be disrupted livelihoods for local people. Dayak Benawan women's role is to be active in preserving nature. Before clearing forests to create fields, there is a ritual *besentek*, which means it is fed to the forest. In this case, the woman was the one who usually performs this ritual. There is an intense psychological bond between women and nature, in which the old rituals are still practiced, until the modern era. This tradition indirectly maintains the balance of natural ecosystems; respect human nature, to maintain good relations with nature.

Like other Kalimantan region, there are two seasons in Kampung Pejalu; the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season will affect the work of men who move outside the home, such as rubber tapping and work in the fields so that men no jobs and only in the house. While women cannot tap rubber in addition to and work in the fields, women still work around the house as well.

In dry season Dayak Benawan families survive to perpetuate life. During the dry season, the water will shrink rubber and increasingly drying up. Water is not plentiful anymore because of every day in the tapping. Thus the womens income will be reduced during the dry season.

Therefore, to sustain the needs of the women's family activities nyikep to get side-dishes and they plucked leaves of young rubber to vegetable.

Customs and traditions are the highest rules that are adhered to and trusted by the people of this tribe. None of the members of this ethnic group resist the customs and change their traditions. Customary practices and belief are a great tradition in the Dayak Benawan community, including the practice of division of labor based on gender. Females and males take their traditional roles or positions.

In particular customs, women are powerless parties in marital status. After holding a traditional marriage, the wife should not argue what the husband or wife can't go against the opinion or decision of the husband as head of the household; they call mali'k. This indicates that the indigenous Dayak Benawan is still dominated by a patriarchal system, where a woman's decision is not to hear (Voiceless) in the household.

Women symbolized as 'the kitchen of the house' in the family of Dayak Benawan community, means it is only women who know all the elements and in the kitchen affairs. Only women in the kitchen who knows when they run out of salt and sugar, no vegetables, no side dishes, and no rice. When the family ran out of necessity in the kitchen, the women tell their husbands to shop in shops.



**Figure 1.** Dayak Benawan women in death ceremony tradition.

In the case of Dayak Benawan women showed that their double burden is not considered by them as oppression and exploitation. They assume that by doing the hard work, not a double burden, but rather an obligation of women in the household.

### **Gender Roles: Inequality and the Struggle**

Dayak Benawan women in the Cowet village still in a poor state, both in the social structure and economic structure (Niko, 2019). Patriarchal narratives are still embedded in the daily life of the Dayak community, and it is exacerbating the poor condition of women in the structure (Maunati, 2004; Niko, 2019). Then, the women's knowledge is limited, so it is not aware of the forms of the marginalization and

subordination to themselves in the sphere of social and economic structures.

The legitimacy of Dayak Benawan people have not put the position of women equal to men in terms of policy-makers, this is evidenced in the last ten years, no woman had ever run for village chief in the village Cowet. The political reality of gender bias, in the end, excludes women from the formal political world (Noble, 2008).

Dayak Benawan women's status can be seen in the social structure through the construction of the role and status within the household, community structures, and traditional structures. When I talk about women in the structure, it will be directly related to their daily activities such as; division of labor based on gender in their household. The division of duties applies to women and men and be applied in the presence of customary rules. On the local political values Dayak Benawan, customs used as a tool in the control of women (Niko, 2018).

Benawan men get side dishes from looking for fish in the river and hunting in the woods. The domestic life of the Dayak Benawan people relies heavily on nature. The food needs of their families is mainly from natural products such as vegetables, side dishes, and rice. Benawan women get vegetables found from the forest, and farmyard. Later, Benawan men get side dishes from hunting the fish in the river and hunt other animals in the woods. Women on indigenous peoples are often marginalized because of living in the township, relatively few, and communities to manage the forest with local knowledge (Maffii, 2008; Kartika 2015).

Gender roles that occur in the Dayak Benawan community may not be separated from the tradition of the local community. In this case, the locality influential in the formation of the division of labor between genders. Indigenous women's gender roles and their relationships with men, their communities, and society as a whole form their ability to achieve health and quality of life (Hughes, 2004).

The first proposition that education is a major factor for women is not included in the public sector and domestic policy, but it is also tradition that is influential in determining that 'women should not do anything'. Today, Dayak Benawan tradition has not changed, and the position of women, is in the domestic sector, while men dominate in the public sector.

Similarly, economic access, Dayak Benawan women, just rely on nature as a pillar of the family economy. As a source of life, nature is respected as sacred, and human evolution is measured according to the human ability to blend with the rhythms and patterns of nature intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually (Shiva, 1997). Based on my observations found that women in the Cowet village work tapping rubber trees (*motong'k*) and rice farming (*kume'k*) as the main livelihood.

Mulyanto et al. (2009), asserts that the participation of women in the work of agriculture more dramatic rise of social class household has in possession of the land, for the women of the household farm workers, the work of agriculture is the backbone of the acquisition of cash and grain for household needs ladder. In his opinion, for the women of the household as laborers, the primary income source for obtaining cash in support of household income is by working on the farm. Furthermore, he



also confirmed that his view was that women farmworkers cooperated with the men in the family (all members of the family) in obtaining the primary income, and this had nothing to do with issues of gender awareness.

The root of the problem because of the inequality between men and women. Feminist sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway and Lynn Smith-Lovin asserted that gender inequality is very different racial and ethnic inequality, gender inequality is happening in the household, in the church, and various types of relationship roles (Hughes & Kroehler, 2011). According Indraswari (2009) Gender inequality itself exacerbates poverty of women and vice versa

Limitations of the level of female education have become one of the factors of gender inequality that occurred in Dayak Benawan community. In this case, there is also a Dayak Benawan woman with high education (highest completed high school) but still restricted access to women in the public sphere.

Injustice against women in Dayak Benawan traditions basically in the claim, thereby traditional authorities and village officials, even women do not regard it as an injustice. However, the narrative of this injustice described at the time when the interviews with the women. Gender inequalities are visible manifestations of the division of labor in the domestic sector (households/families), access to education, and the opportunity to enter the public sphere (customs agency, municipal officials, and farmers), in which women are not considered equal to men.

The emergence of a strong belief in tradition Dayak Benawan community, as well as their belief in tradition and religion that they

profess. Mastery of men against the public space and domestic space is regarded as traditionally believed to local communities. Therefore, women do not get a place/specific position on policy-making in the public sphere, even in the domestic space.

Education alone can't be a guarantee for women to access formal work in the public sector, such as customs agencies and municipal officials. As a result, the formal non-public sector, women have not been much involved, in farmers' groups in their village. Not only that, even educational levels do not affect the system at every family tradition (the domestic sector), women still 'tail' to men in terms of domestic policy.

### **Conclusion: Critical Notes**

Men who become policy makers in the domestic and public sector are not seen as having reached this position based on education, occupation, and social class, but based on the tradition of Dayak Benawan people in the past, who have always chosen men to become leaders for women. A strong belief in this practice as well as their belief in tradition and religion that they profess. Mastery of men against the public and domestic space was regarded as traditionally believed in local communities. Therefore, women who do not get a particular position on policy-making in public and domestic space is not seen as gender inequality.

Gender struggle to give equal expression to women in public employment is a long history, in which the protection of indigenous women in many countries still seem half-hearted (Edsforth, 1992). In the Dayak Benawan community, the position of women in traditional

institutions, structural village government, and family, can't be separated from local tradition. The Dayak Benawan's structure is still dominated by patriarchy, leaving a form of injustice that occurs in women. The powerlessness of women in the fight against the existing traditional system is a form of oppression they are inside the structure.

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