# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2018

## *Community Networks*

# Global Information Society Watch

# 2018

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*This edition of GISWatch came into being alongside a brand new baby boy. Welcome to the world, Ronan Diga!*

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# MALAYSIA

## THE GENDER DIMENSION TOWARDS ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY NETWORKS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA
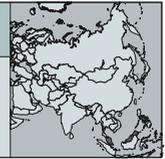
**Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER)**
Angela M. Kuga Thas
www.empowermalaysia.org

### Introduction

Arguably one of the most marginalised and vulnerable communities in Peninsular Malaysia are the indigenous women (*Orang Asli* women in Malay). While many Malaysians today know about the native land rights issues of these peoples, it took more than 30 years before this level of awareness was achieved. In fact, it is through the internet that the level of awareness accelerated, in particular on the issue of the Baram Dam in Sarawak.[1] It is, however, taking even longer to achieve a greater consciousness about the gender inequality issues faced by Orang Asli women among Orang Asli women themselves, among seasoned activists who have worked on the native land rights of the Orang Asli, and among other human rights activists. This phenomenon is very much symptomatic of how gender equality is still not very well understood even by those who champion human rights or deem themselves progressive.

As EMPOWER we have tried to enhance the analytical and advocacy skills of Orang Asli women since 2013, with the idea that whatever issues they face, they would have to self-mobilise, self-organise and advocate on their own initiative, taking ownership of the problem and engaging directly in strategising and seeking a solution, and eventually solving the problem.

The work of consciousness raising and capacity building is slow and frustrating. This is certainly not something new when it comes to working with communities. We have witnessed the common phenomenon where women fail to acknowledge that gender inequality exists in their community, as "things have always been that way". For example, while getting Orang Asli women to identify and acknowledge the issues of gender inequality that they face has been an uphill task, even getting them to acknowledge that domestic violence or violence against women (VAW) takes place in their communities is challenging. That there are men who prefer to marry and not work and rely on their wives to support them, for the Orang Asli women, is also not a gender inequality issue. They are just matter-of-fact life issues that some women are unfortunate enough to face. In fact, in almost all workshops we have conducted, the Orang Asli women we have engaged with would rather have my colleagues and I believe that VAW and gender-based discrimination do not exist in their communities.

You may be asking at this point, how does this in any way relate to the idea of community networks for these peoples? A lot, in fact, especially in the context of a new government that was voted in on 9 May 2018, and the optimism that there are more allies in government to work with compared to the previous one.[2]

### Advocating for community networks

"There is free internet bandwidth in Malaysia" – so I was told, but that was not the full answer I needed. It signalled the beginning of EMPOWER's efforts to explore how best to move ahead with working with the Orang Asli community in Malaysia on establishing community networks with them, with a specific focus on involving the Orang Asli women and girls.

There are only about 148,000 Orang Asli in the whole of Peninsular Malaysia.[3] They are primarily located in the states of Perak, Kelantan, Pahang, Johor, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. They are also very divided: divided by groups of who knows who, of who can work with who, of who married who and who did not marry who; and they are not necessarily united in a village, not necessarily united through marriage, and certainly not necessarily united

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1   See Bardeen, S. (2016, 22 March). Baram Dam Stopped! A Victory for Indigenous Rights. *International Rivers*. https://www.internationalrivers.org/blogs/433-18

2   At the time of writing, the new government has been in power for less than 100 days, but many feel that political will is still weak, as only recently – on 4 August 2018 – another Orang Asli blockade was torn down by a durian plantation corporation in Kelantan. See Mahsinah Abdullah, A. (2018, 16 February). 800 Orang Asli set up blockades against logging, durian plantation near Gua Musang. *New Straits Times*. https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/02/336207/800-orang-asli-set-blockades-against-logging-durian-plantation-near-gua and Lin, K. J. (2018, 4 August). Orang Asli claim blockade cut down by durian company. *Malaysiakini*. https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/437481

3   2008 data. Expected to be much lower in 2018, estimated at 100,000.

through ethnicity. Officially, there are 18 Orang Asli tribes – Bateq, Jahai, Kensiu, Kintaq, Lanoh, Mendriq, Cheq Wong, Jah Hut, Mah Meri, Semai, Semaq Beri, Temiar, Jakun, Orang Kanaq, Orang Kuala, Orang Seletar, Semelai and Temuan – categorised under three main groups according to their different languages and customs:

- Semang (or Negrito), generally confined to the northern portion of the peninsula
- Senoi, residing in the central region
- Proto-Malay (or Aboriginal Malay), in the southern region.

As many as 76.9% of the Orang Asli are considered poor, with 35.2% deemed "very poor". The literacy rate is only 43% and life expectancy at an average of 53 years old. Some Orang Asli remain on native lands, others have set up homes closer to or within urbanised areas, and some others have relocated to Orang Asli resettlements and poor quality government housing which usually means no opportunity at all for owning land. So, while native land rights issues are very pressing for some, not all face these issues in the same way.

For example, with the advent of the new government of Malaysia as mentioned earlier, after 61 years of rule under the same dominant political parties, two advocacies unfolded. One was the demand that the Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA),[4] the government department that is supposed to look after their interests, welfare and development, be completely abolished. The other was to reform JAKOA, to ensure that Orang Asli held key positions in JAKOA and that decision making was more transparent, inclusive and participatory with the community.

The reality is that not all Orang Asli are able to rely on their traditional livelihoods any longer and waged work is necessary. As such, initially there was a prominent clash of positions in civil society as well as among the Orang Asli. However, as consultations start to be organised, with the most recent one held on 21 July 2018, the position appears to be moving towards reforming JAKOA. In line with this, advocating and getting buy-in to the idea of community networks therefore has to be very much needs-based and consultative as well, or it will not be prioritised at all.

To try to unpack the challenges further, I discuss three scenarios, trying to maintain anonymity at the same time to safeguard the privacy of the Orang Asli whom we have consulted.

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4    Department for the Advancement of Indigenous Peoples.

## Scenario 1

We visited quite a self-contained village. The head of the village is reportedly one of the more educated of the Orang Asli village heads, having been attached to a higher institution of learning before his retirement. We discussed issues faced, and we highlighted that there were three areas that we would persist in working on, and it is only in these areas that we would be able to collaborate with them, as our resources and capacities too were limited. The three areas are: gender awareness raising and advocacy capacity-building training; training women to engage in community schools development; and the establishment of community networks.

It was interesting to see the dynamics as we sat in a circle discussing the issues. There were more women than men, but men appeared to have a more significant weight when they spoke. All were very interested in the training of teachers for community schools, primarily because they saw education as the only way out of poverty for their children, and eventually for themselves.

Prior to arriving at this village, I had heard that the villagers were creating problems for one of the community teacher volunteers, who is perceived as an outsider and who married into the community. She was one of the two Orang Asli women we brought to an educational training workshop on phonics as a teaching methodology and approach. She was not at this consultation, but the second woman, who is seen as one of the women community leaders, was.

The villagers said they wanted a young man to be trained as a community teacher rather than any of the women. The woman community leader whom we had developed a long relationship with, and who has participated in at least five of our workshops, agreed and reiterated this desire. I was a little taken aback, considering how long we had already worked with this community, with at least five of the women having attended two of our trainings. I had also expected that at least one of the two women whom we brought to the educational training workshop on phonics would be put forward as a potential trainee, together with the young man. Instead, the retort was, "Must it be only women?"

The concept of a community network, however, did appeal to one Orang Asli woman at the consultation. She had married an outsider and spoke Mandarin. She already had an entrepreneurial mind-set. She was happily elaborating on how many villagers they had and how the community school could benefit, as well as a number of other villages.

I shared how they could build their own communication tower, and when the village head asked if setting up the communications tower would be legal, and I answered "No", all conversation stopped immediately. Even when I explained that we would need to find a way to work on getting those in authority to make an exception, no one would broach the subject again or asked how this could be done when the village head switched the topic and started informing us of his ideas and potential collaboration with a university for an extended vocational training programme that would include the young people from the village. Discussions subsequently returned to the issue of education, especially English education for the children, and we could not raise the subject of community networks again.

Yet – in something of an irony – the women in the village had been organising group activities among themselves by playing and following tutorial videos from YouTube at the community hall once a week.

## Scenario 2

The next village we visited was closer to urban development but it appeared much more run down. Population density seemed higher as houses were packed closer together, and it lacked stable connectivity despite the close proximity to the city. When we broached the subject of community networks here, there was very limited and selective interest from one younger Orang Asli woman. She was more interested in having a computer and a printer and for connectivity to be set up in the village head's home, as they wanted to advocate against the sandstone mining nearby that was affecting the quality of their air and health.

The message we received was that not everyone would be welcoming of a community network, and that it was best to be low-key and small-scale and keep the equipment with the village head.

The wife of the village head attended the consultation, but we could not get a clear reason as to why community members would not be completely agreeable to having a community network, which would benefit many more people rather than just the house of the village head and those closely connected to the village head.

## Scenario 3

We also organised a consultation during a training with Orang Asli women who live in villages that are semi-urbanised or urbanised, but we organised this training-cum-consultation outside of their villages. These women were very interested and concurred that there was a need for a community network where they live. They were keen on saving communication costs, developing an income-generating arm, and being able to organise to make demands on the government. This was just after the results of the 14th general election had been announced, so they already knew that there was a change in government. While they persisted in saying that they do not want to have any engagement in politics, these women were more political than the others in Scenarios 1 and 2 in how they wanted updates on how to move ahead with a community network, and other advocacies such as on basic infrastructure issues, health and education.

Looking back at how we conducted the consultations on community networks, I felt that we could get clearer responses and expressed needs from the women if they were outside of their villages, away from not only the men and the gender-power dynamics that come with that, but the prevalent politics in these villages. I felt that even though women were very much present in Scenario 1, only two or three women would speak, and only when prompted. However, bringing women to participate in a consultation outside their villages meant thinking of:

- Who else would need to accompany them? Sometimes their husbands would insist on participating, or the women would insist that their husbands attend as well.
- Providing facilities and caregiving for their children.
- Considering paying an opportunity cost for daily wages lost for those days.
- Ensuring that it only took a day for such a consultation. A two-day event would already be problematic for some, especially if paying an opportunity cost for daily wages lost was not possible.

## Action steps

As EMPOWER proceeds with seeking face-to-face consultations with key ministries in the new government of Malaysia, much needs to be done to push for policy and institutional reforms. We have been trying to organise a national Orang Asli women's consultation since the start of 2018. It has been postponed from April to May and in July, yet again.

The resistance comes from the "official structures" of the networks and villages, rather than the women themselves. EMPOWER has spoken with established women leaders of the community, who have expressed support but with little

follow-through in real terms. In private, a few Orang Asli women have expressed interest to EMPOWER staff, but appear to not know how to proceed without inviting the ire of those in power around them.

EMPOWER still intends to hold the national Orang Asli women's consultation this year (2018) and at least one more in 2019 so that the Orang Asli women can meet and update each other.

However, the question now arises: Would such a national consultation be considered successful if we only had 15 women, the average number of participants we expect for a workshop with Orang Asli women? To many, this would appear to be a failure, but the sheer effort of trying to bring these Orang Asli women together so that they are better able to express their needs and priorities for advocacies and initiatives that would benefit them, their children and their communities, remains unmeasurable and too often considered insignificant in the whole value chain of development initiatives.

# Community Networks

THE 43 COUNTRY REPORTS included in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) capture the different experiences and approaches in setting up community networks across the globe. They show that key ideas, such as participatory governance systems, community ownership and skills transfer, as well as the "do-it-yourself" spirit that drives community networks in many different contexts, are characteristics that lend them a shared purpose and approach.

The country reports are framed by eight thematic reports that deal with critical issues such as the regulatory framework necessary to support community networks, sustainability, local content, feminist infrastructure and community networks, and the importance of being aware of "community stories" and the power structures embedded in those stories.

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