

Crafting Futures: Sustainable Handicraft Livelihoods and Empowerment among Orang Asli Women in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous women contribute significantly to household survival and community resilience through traditional livelihood practices, yet their economic roles remain underrepresented in development research and policy. This study examines how handicraft production supports sustainable livelihoods and women's empowerment among Orang Asli women in Malaysia. Adopting a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Orang Asli women who are actively involved in handicraft-making within their communities. The interviews explored participants' livelihood experiences, income generation, skill transmission, perceived benefits, and challenges associated with sustaining handicraft activities. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and meanings. The findings indicate that handicraft-based activities function as an important source of supplementary income, contributing to household economic stability while enabling women to maintain cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge. Participation in handicraft production enhanced women's sense of self-worth, financial autonomy, and involvement in household decision-making, reflecting multiple dimensions of empowerment. However, participants also reported persistent structural constraints, including limited access to markets, inconsistent demand, inadequate financial and institutional support, and challenges related to raw materials and production capacity. Despite these limitations, Orang Asli women demonstrated resilience and adaptability by combining traditional skills with informal livelihood strategies. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on indigenous women's livelihoods by providing context-specific insights into the lived experiences of Orang Asli women in Malaysia. The findings offer important implications for inclusive development initiatives and policy interventions aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Strengthening support for handicraft-based livelihoods can enhance sustainable and equitable development outcomes for indigenous women.

Keywords: Orang Asli, women, SDGs, handicrafts, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous women play a critical role in sustaining household livelihoods and preserving cultural heritage through traditional economic activities, particularly in contexts where access to formal employment remains limited (UNDP, 2016; UN Women, 2020). In Malaysia, Orang Asli women have long engaged in handicraft production such as weaving, beadwork, and forest-based crafts as a means of income generation, cultural transmission, and social cohesion (Nicholas, 2000). These activities often rely on indigenous knowledge and

locally available resources, positioning handicrafts as potentially sustainable livelihood practices within indigenous communities. Sustainable livelihoods are widely recognised as a cornerstone of inclusive and equitable development, especially for marginalised populations facing structural inequalities (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998). Despite sustained development efforts, Orang Asli communities in Malaysia continue to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, economic exclusion, and limited access to education and employment opportunities compared to the national population (Department of Orang Asli Development [JAKOA], 2019). For Orang Asli women, these challenges are further intensified by gendered constraints, including limited market access, restricted mobility, and inadequate institutional support for informal economic activities (Kabeer, 1999; UN Women, 2020). Existing research on indigenous livelihoods in Malaysia has largely focused on income levels, resettlement outcomes, or state-led development programmes (Masron et al., 2013). While these studies provide valuable macro-level insights, they often overlook women lived experiences and agency within informal livelihood systems. In particular, there is limited empirical understanding of how Orang Asli women perceive handicraft-based livelihoods and how participation in these activities contributes to their sense of empowerment, autonomy, and decision-making power (Rafidah et al., 2025). This gap constrains the development of culturally responsive and gender-sensitive interventions aligned with global development agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015).

Orang Asli Women and Handicrafts in Malaysia

The Orang Asli, meaning “original people” in Malay, are the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia and represent approximately 0.7% of the country’s population (Mat Dong et al., 2022). Comprising three major ethnic groups Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay each with distinct languages, social structures, and cultural practices, the Orang Asli communities have historically maintained close relationships with their natural environments (Nicholas, 2000). Their traditional livelihoods are diverse and largely forest-based, including hunting, gathering, small-scale shifting agriculture, and handicraft production. These activities not only provide food security and income but also reinforce cultural identity, social cohesion, and the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. Despite Malaysia’s rapid socio-economic development, Orang Asli communities continue to face structural marginalisation. Studies indicate that these communities experience disproportionately high poverty rates, limited access to education and healthcare, inadequate housing, and social exclusion from mainstream economic and political systems (JAKOA, 2019). Poverty and marginalisation are compounded by the historical encroachment of forest lands, displacement due to development projects, and limited recognition of indigenous land rights, all of which undermine the sustainability of traditional livelihoods. Orang Asli women, in particular, encounter a “double burden” as both primary caretakers of households and contributors to household income through informal economic activities. Gendered inequalities intersect with ethnic marginalisation, limiting women’s access to financial resources, markets, and institutional support. Nevertheless, Orang Asli women play a central role in preserving cultural heritage through their engagement in handicraft production, including weaving, beadwork, basketry, and woodcraft. These handicrafts are not only income-generating but also serve as a medium for intergenerational knowledge transmission, community cohesion, and cultural resilience.

Handicraft production has long been an integral aspect of Orang Asli women’s livelihoods, cultural expression, and community identity. Using locally produced materials including rattan, bamboo, palm leaves, and forest fibres, Orang Asli women traditionally create a variety of handicrafts, such as weaving, beadwork, basketry, woodworking, and mat-making (Nor et al., 2023). These crafts are not only utilitarian but also carry cultural and symbolic significance, reflecting indigenous knowledge, social structures, and intergenerational traditions. Through handicrafts, women contribute to the preservation of their cultural heritage while simultaneously supporting household subsistence (Masron et al., 2013). Handicraft production also functions as a critical source of supplementary income for Orang Asli women, particularly in communities where formal employment opportunities are limited. By selling their products in local markets, through cooperatives, or via community-based initiatives, women generate revenue that can support household needs such as food, education, and healthcare (UNDP, 2016). Moreover, income from handicrafts provides women with a degree of financial independence, enhancing their capacity to participate in household decision-making and social activities, which are essential elements of empowerment.

Orang Asli women face multiple challenges in sustaining these livelihoods. Limited market access, low demand for indigenous crafts, lack of marketing and entrepreneurial skills, and insufficient institutional support are

persistent barriers. Environmental constraints, such as the scarcity of raw materials due to deforestation or development projects, further hinder production. Nonetheless, Orang Asli women demonstrate resilience by adapting traditional techniques, creating innovative designs, and participating in cooperative or community-based programs to enhance the value of their crafts. Research indicates that handicraft-based livelihoods have broader socio-cultural and development implications. They contribute not only to household income but also to the transmission of indigenous knowledge, social cohesion, and cultural sustainability (Karim et al., 2023). Furthermore, supporting these livelihoods aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), by promoting women's empowerment, income generation, and social inclusion (United Nations, 2015). Understanding the experiences, challenges, and strategies of Orang Asli women in handicraft production is therefore crucial for designing culturally sensitive, gender-responsive, and sustainable development interventions.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In spite of increasing recognition of indigenous women's contributions to household economies and cultural sustainability, Orang Asli women in Malaysia continue to face persistent structural and systemic barriers that limit the viability and growth of handicraft-based livelihoods. While handicraft production is frequently promoted as a culturally appropriate income-generating activity for indigenous communities, such initiatives are often implemented without sufficient empirical understanding of women's lived experiences, actual livelihood outcomes, or empowerment processes (UN Women, 2020). As a result, many interventions remain short-term, externally driven, and inadequately aligned with the socio-cultural and economic realities of Orang Asli women.

Existing development policies and support programmes tend to prioritise poverty reduction indicators and output-based measures, such as income levels or production volume, while overlooking less tangible yet critical dimensions of empowerment, including agency, decision-making power, skill recognition, and cultural autonomy. Moreover, research on indigenous livelihoods in Malaysia has largely adopted quantitative or macro-level approaches, providing limited insight into how women themselves perceive the sustainability of handicraft activities and the challenges they encounter in accessing markets, resources, and institutional support (Masron et al., 2013).

The lack of qualitative, gender-sensitive, and context-specific evidence has contributed to a disconnect between policy intentions and actual livelihood outcomes for Orang Asli women. Without a grounded understanding of women's perspectives, development interventions risk reinforcing dependency, marginalisation, or cultural commodification rather than fostering genuine empowerment and sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, the limited documentation of Orang Asli women's voices restricts their visibility within academic discourse and weakens efforts to design inclusive development strategies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Addressing this research gap is essential to generate empirically grounded insights into how handicraft-based livelihoods function in practice and how they shape empowerment outcomes among Orang Asli women. By centering indigenous women's lived experiences, this study seeks to inform more responsive, culturally sensitive, and sustainable livelihood interventions in Malaysia.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore how handicraft-based activities contribute to sustainable livelihoods and women's empowerment among Orang Asli women in Malaysia. Specifically, the study seeks to examine Orang Asli women's lived experiences of engaging in handicraft production, with particular attention to income generation, livelihood sustainability, and the social and cultural meanings attached to these activities. Specifically, the objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To explore how engagement in handicraft-based activities contributes to sustainable livelihoods and empowerment among Orang Asli women in Malaysia.
2. To explore the impact of handicraft-based livelihoods on the social, economic, and cultural well-being of Orang Asli women.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore sustainable handicraft livelihoods and empowerment among Orang Asli women in Malaysia. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings attached to handicraft practices within their socio-cultural contexts. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were employed to capture rich, narrative data while allowing flexibility for participants to express their views freely.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved eight Orang Asli women engaged in handicraft activities from three indigenous tribes in three different locations of Peninsular Malaysia, namely Mah Meri tribe from Carey Island, Selangor, Jakun tribe from Chini Lake, Pahang and Temiar tribe from Kuala Betis, Kelantan. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: (i) being an Orang Asli woman, (ii) active involvement in handicraft production, and (iii) willingness to share experiences related to livelihoods and empowerment. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed relevant knowledge and firsthand experience related to the study objectives. The inclusion of women from different tribes enabled a broader representation of indigenous handicraft practices and socio-economic realities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interview; an interview guide was developed to explore key themes. Interviews were conducted in three locations which are in Carey Island (Mah Meri tribe), Chini Lake (Jakun tribe) and Kuala Betis (Temiar tribe). Where necessary, interviews were conducted in Malay or local dialects, with clarification provided to ensure accurate understanding. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti version 8 software. The analysis followed a systematic process of familiarisation with the data, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, and development of themes related to sustainable livelihoods and empowerment. An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori. To enhance credibility, recurring themes were compared across participants and tribes to identify commonalities and contextual differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with eight Orang Asli women from the Mah Meri, Jakun, and Temiar tribes yielded four overarching themes that explain how handicraft engagement shapes sustainable livelihoods and women's empowerment. These three themes capture shared experiences across tribes while reflecting contextual variations.

Handicraft Production as an Adaptive Livelihood Strategy

Handicraft activities emerged as an important adaptive livelihood strategy in contexts characterised by limited and unstable income opportunities. Participants reported that handicraft production complemented seasonal or informal work, providing supplementary income that contributed to household economic stability. The ability to engage in handicraft work from home was frequently highlighted as enabling women to manage domestic responsibilities alongside income-generating activities. This flexibility enhanced livelihood resilience,

particularly in economically marginalised settings. The following excerpts illustrate participants' responses that underpin the identified themes derived from the thematic analysis.

"We produced masks and other handicrafts such as mats and many other weaving products for living". (Participant 1, Mah Meri tribe)

"Women produce baskets, and they are for sale". (Participant 5, Temiar tribe)

"Most of the Orang Asli women know how to make handicrafts like weaving products blowpipe carvings, wooden carvings or rattan products and they are made for sale". (Participant 6, Jakun tribe)

Handicraft production functioned as an accessible form of **decent and culturally grounded work** for Orang Asli women. Participants described handicrafts as a flexible income-generating activity that complemented seasonal or informal labour. Although earnings were modest, they contributed to household financial stability and reduced economic vulnerability. The home-based nature of handicraft work enabled women to participate in economic activities without disengaging from caregiving responsibilities, reflecting inclusive pathways to decent work consistent with **SDG 8**. Prior studies have shown that informal and home-based livelihood activities play a critical role in sustaining rural and indigenous households where formal labour markets are inaccessible (ILO, 2018; UNDP, 2020). Consistent with indigenous livelihood literature, handicrafts functioned as an adaptive economic strategy rather than a pathway to rapid growth, underscoring the need for context-sensitive interpretations of "decent work" in indigenous settings (Chambers & Conway, 1992).

Cultural Continuity through Indigenous Craft Practices

Across all three tribes, handicraft production was closely tied to cultural continuity and identity preservation. Skills and knowledge were primarily transmitted through informal, intergenerational learning within families and communities. Participants emphasised the symbolic and cultural meanings embedded in motifs, materials, and production techniques. Handicrafts were therefore perceived not only as economic products but also as expressions of indigenous heritage, reinforcing collective identity and cultural pride. The three participants' responses reveal a recurring emphasis on craft practices for their tribe's cultural steadiness which informed the development of this theme.

"We produced weaving products from mengkuang leaves, masks from woods and other kinds of origami to reserve our culture". (Participant 3, Mah Meri tribe)

"I used to do wood works using rattan before". (Participant 2, Jakun tribe)

"...they produced 'tempok' a type of head wear which is made from 'mengkuang' leaves to be used in Sewang dance". (Participant 4, Temiar tribe)

Handicraft practices were closely associated with **cultural identity and social inclusion**. Participants emphasised the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge while gaining visibility in external markets and public platforms. Engagement in handicraft-related activities enabled women to bridge cultural boundaries and interact with wider society, contributing to reduced social and economic marginalisation. These findings align with **SDG 10**, highlighting the role of culturally rooted livelihoods in addressing inequalities faced by indigenous populations. Existing studies highlight how culturally grounded economic activities can promote inclusion by valuing indigenous knowledge rather than marginalising it (UNESCO, 2019; Sillitoe, 2007). Handicrafts thus functioned not only as economic commodities but also as symbolic representations of identity, contributing to cultural legitimacy and social recognition in broader society.

Women's Empowerment through Skills Development and Recognition

Engagement in handicraft activities contributed to multiple dimensions of women's empowerment. Participants described increased self-confidence, skill mastery, and a sense of personal achievement derived from producing and selling handicrafts. Economic contributions, even when modest, enhanced women's perceived value within

households and communities. Involvement in exhibitions, training programmes, or cooperative activities further strengthened social networks and visibility, fostering greater social recognition.

“As a Jakun woman, improving my handicraft skills allows me to contribute to my family’s income. When others appreciate my products, I feel more independent and valued.” (Participant 8, Jakun tribe)

“Developing my skills has given me confidence not only in making crafts but also in believing in myself as a Mah Meri woman.” (Participant 5, Mah Meri tribe)

“After gaining new skills, I feel more confident to speak and share my ideas. Recognition of my work makes me feel respected as a Temiar woman.” (Participant 2, Temiar tribe)

Participants reported that involvement in handicraft production enhanced their **economic agency and self-confidence**, contributing to gender empowerment within households and communities. Women noted increased autonomy in managing personal income and greater participation in household decision-making. Recognition of their skills through sales, exhibitions, or training programmes further strengthened their social standing. These outcomes reflect progress toward **SDG 5**, particularly in promoting women’s economic participation and empowerment in marginalised contexts. This finding aligns with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and supports feminist development perspectives that link economic participation with expanded agency and voice (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014). Previous research on women’s informal livelihoods similarly demonstrates that control over income rather than income size alone is central to empowerment outcomes (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Among indigenous women, such empowerment processes are often gradual and relational, embedded within family and community structures rather than individualistic trajectories (Sultana, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This study examined sustainable handicraft livelihoods and women’s empowerment among Orang Asli women from the Mah Meri, Jakun, and Temiar communities in Malaysia. Drawing on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, the findings demonstrate that handicraft production functions as a culturally grounded livelihood strategy that supports women’s economic participation, strengthens gendered agency, and contributes to social inclusion. In contexts marked by limited access to formal employment, handicrafts provide an accessible and flexible form of work that enhances household resilience while enabling women to balance productive and reproductive roles. The study contributes to the literature by showing how indigenous women’s livelihoods intersect with multiple dimensions of sustainable development. Handicraft engagement not only advances women’s empowerment through skills, income control, and recognition (SDG 5), but also reflects inclusive interpretations of decent work suited to indigenous contexts (SDG 8). At the same time, the preservation and public visibility of indigenous cultural knowledge through handicrafts offer pathways toward social recognition and reduced marginalisation (SDG 10). These findings underscore the importance of viewing indigenous handicrafts as both economic and cultural assets rather than marginal or informal activities. However, the study also highlights persistent structural constraints that limit the sustainability and transformative potential of handicraft livelihoods. Restricted market access, dependence on intermediaries, low pricing, and uneven institutional support continue to reinforce gendered and ethnic inequalities. Without coordinated and long-term interventions, empowerment gains are likely to remain incremental rather than systemic.

Future studies could expand the scope of this research by involving a larger number of participants to enhance the generalisability of the findings. Including multiple villages within each Orang Asli tribe would allow for comparative analysis of contextual and cultural differences in handicraft practices. In addition, incorporating both active and inactive handicraft producers could provide deeper insights into barriers to participation, sustainability challenges, and factors influencing long-term engagement in handicraft livelihoods. This study should also engage with key stakeholders, including NGOs involved in handicraft promotion, tourism industry players, relevant government agencies such as JAKOA and Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, as well as buyers and intermediaries. Engaging these actors would enable a more comprehensive understanding of market dynamics, value chain structures, and institutional challenges shaping Orang Asli women’s participation in sustainable handicraft livelihoods. Future research should investigate how income generated from handicraft activities influences intra-household power relations, decision-making patterns, and the negotiation of gender

roles within Orang Asli families. Particular attention could also be given to the emergence of women's leadership roles at the household and community levels, in order to better understand the transformative potential of handicraft livelihoods beyond economic outcomes. Future research should also look at how environmental issues including land development, deforestation, and the growing scarcity of raw resources directly impact the creation of handicrafts and the maintenance of Orang Asli cultural customs. Such research would be vital for understanding the linkages between environmental sustainability, cultural heritage, and the long-term viability of indigenous subsistence choices.

Overall, this research emphasises the need for development approaches that integrate cultural recognition, gender equality, and inclusive economic participation. Strengthening market linkages, enhancing capacity-building initiatives, and recognising indigenous women's knowledge systems within policy frameworks are critical for advancing sustainable and equitable development outcomes. By centring the voices and experiences of Orang Asli women, this study offers empirical insights that contribute to broader debates on indigenous livelihoods, women's empowerment, and the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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