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Surviving the Edges: Multidimensional Poverty among Indigenous Women Community in Remote Rural Areas in Indonesia

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Abstract

Sustainable development should promote equality benefits for Indigenous people communities. This study examines the chronic multidimensional poverty experienced by the indigenous women of Dayak Benawan in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. This paper employs an ethnographic methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews and participatory observation to explore the multidimensional nature of poverty within the Benawan Dayak community. Data collection involves direct engagement with Dayak Benawan women, community members, and indigenous leaders (Pesirah Dayak Benawan) to capture diverse perspectives and lived experiences. The fieldwork period spanned from January 2020 to July 2022. A thematic analysis is conducted to identify key dimensions of Dayak Benawan women's experience of poverty, including their access to sustainable livelihoods, education, healthcare services, and land ownership. This aligns with Sen's theory on poverty among women, which argues that female poverty emerges and worsens due to gender inequality. The classifications of this inequality include gender-based mortality rates, access to basic facilities, ownership rights, employment opportunities, and education. The findings of this study reveal that poverty among Dayak Benawan women is not merely an economic issue but is deeply rooted in a complex interplay of social, cultural, and environmental factors. Key contributing dimensions include limited access to education, healthcare, land ownership, and sustainable livelihoods, exacerbated by geographic isolation and sociopolitical marginalization. This research advocates for targeted policies to promote social equity for Indigenous communities in Indonesia, including guarantees for healthcare, education, and the sustainability of livelihoods within their ancestral lands.

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Poverty has traditionally been understood in economic terms, focusing primarily on income levels and subsistence needs. However, contemporary perspectives recognize poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond deprivation, including access to healthcare, education, and other essential services (Chambers, 2014). This framework acknowledges the interplay of economic, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions in shaping poverty in rural and indigenous communities. Within this expanded understanding, the poverty experienced by women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities, has emerged as a pressing global issue.

In Southeast Asia, women in rural areas face persistent economic hardships due to limited access to livelihood resources, education, and healthcare. Studies from Vietnam and Malaysia expose the intersection of gender and poverty, revealing how indigenous and rural women experience multidimensional deprivation due to structural inequalities (Dang, 2021; Saifullah, Masud, & Kari, 2021). Similar challenges are observed in Indonesia, where indigenous women remain particularly vulnerable to poverty, suffering from economic marginalization, restricted access to essential resources, and significant social barriers (Fatema et al., 2021; Maharani et al., 2025).

The feminization of poverty in rural regions is driven by limited access to healthcare, low income, limited education, lack of asset ownership, malnutrition, and inadequate social protection (Balagopal, 2009; Habib et al., 2021; Jacobson, 2018). Women engaged in agriculture within developing countries are key contributors to food security and economic development, yet their contributions to rural communities remain undervalued and unsupported (Jaka & Shava, 2018; Maulu et al., 2021). While global development frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasize gender equality as a pathway to poverty eradication, existing interventions often fail to consider the socioeconomic structures and customary systems shaping poverty among Indigenous women (Bradshaw, Chant, & Linneker, 2017).

In Indonesia, rural poverty continues to pose a significant challenge despite numerous efforts to alleviate it over the decades. Poverty data indicates a marked decline in recent years; the poverty rate, recorded at 14.15% in 2009, has decreased to 9.36% by September 2023. This represents a reduction of 4.79% over the past decade, specifically in rural areas where Indigenous communities face high levels of deprivation due to structural barriers and historical marginalization (National Central Statistics, 2024). Indigenous women, in particular, face compounded vulnerabilities due to inadequate legal protection, environmental degradation, and exclusion from policy frameworks (Wily, 2018). Furthermore, critiques of development policies suggest that prevailing approaches perpetuate economic inequalities rather than developing inclusive growth, leading to an illusion of sustainability (Kremer & Miguel, 2006; Shiva, 1997).

Although extensive research has explored rural poverty, there remains a critical gap in understanding the specific challenges indigenous women face in Indonesia (Ayele et al., 2025; Bwalya et al., 2025; Klasen & Waibel, 2015). As supported by Stamboel (2012) and Carter (2019), most studies fail to adequately address the intersection of economic hardship, gender inequality, and indigenous identity in shaping women's experiences of poverty. This study seeks to fill the gap by examining the multidimensional poverty experienced by Dayak Benawan women in traditional rural communities in Pejalu Remote Village Area, West Kalimantan. This research seeks to analyze the structural barriers that restrict access to essential services to explore the socioeconomic conditions that perpetuate poverty within the Indigenous community. The central question guiding this study is: How do the experiences of poverty of Dayak Benawan Indigenous community women in the Pejalu Remote Village Area of West Kalimantan illustrate multidimensional poverty?

Materials and Methods

Beyond being of Dayak Benawan descent, the researcher was born and raised within this community, which positively influenced my acceptance of my presence. As a key component of feminist ethnographic methodology, critical reflection is essential in this research (Pillow & Mayo, 2011; Davis & Craven, 2022). The researcher sought to engage not only as an observer but also to examine how personal position and identity influenced the perceptions of the research subjects (Niko, 2022). The researcher's identity as an insider, being a native Dayak Benawan, provides a deeper perspective on the narratives of the community. However, the researcher's status as a native can also affect interactions with community members and interpretations of the local knowledge. Through reflective notes documented during fieldwork, the researcher identified gaps in understanding, ethical challenges, and strategies for addressing potential cultural conflicts that arose during the research process.

This study employs feminist ethnographic methodology, which guided the exploration of the experiences of Dayak Benawan women. Feminist ethnography serves as a vital tool for articulating the experiences and perspectives of women by placing their voices, narratives, and marginalized experiences at the center of analysis (Schrock, 2013). A fundamental aspect of feminist research ethics is the commitment to self-reflection (Appleton, 2011; Brydon-Miller, Rector-Aranda, & Stevens, 2015). The researcher's identity as a native Dayak Benawan is inseparable from the research context. This connection is significant in fostering trust and maintaining positive relationships with the informants, necessitating particular access to understanding the complex lives and spaces of marginalized Indigenous women in the Dayak Benawan community.

Fieldwork was carried out from January 2020 to July 2022, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the researcher focused on a doctoral dissertation project. The researcher returned for fieldwork again from February to April 2024. During this period, the researcher conducted interviews with 20 Dayak Benawan women as informants, coded as Inf.01 to Inf.20. The informants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) native Dayak Benawan women, (2) aged 20 years or older, (3) residing in the indigenous Dayak Benawan area of Cowet Village, Balai District, Sanggau Regency, West Kalimantan Province, and (4) willing to participate in this research. Participants must be knowledgeable about the phenomenon (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

The researcher collected data through observation and in-depth interviews with the Dayak Benawan community. The instruments used in this study included interview guides and observation protocols. The researcher employed semi-structured interview techniques to gain insights into their multidimensional poverty. All interviews were conducted in the native Dayak Benawan language, eliminating the need for a translator and allowing the author to grasp the nuances of the conversations directly. According to Fusch, Fusch, and Ness (2017), ethnographic research employs direct observation and unstructured interviews as primary data collection methods. Observation was conducted on the daily activities of women, and the researcher was granted permission to document their activities. Before conducting the interview, the researcher explained the purpose and objectives of the interview and was also granted permission to record the entire conversation. The interview sessions were conducted for approximately 20-40 minutes with each informant.

Following data collection, the researcher used the interactive data analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). This approach consists of three key stages: (1) data condensation, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing with verification. In the *data condensation* stage, raw qualitative data were systematically organized, categorized, and refined to highlight relevant patterns and themes (Azungah, 2018). This process involved transcribing interviews, coding

field notes, and eliminating extraneous information while preserving key insights. Open coding was applied to identify recurring themes and core concepts, with each code assigned to relevant excerpts to facilitate pattern recognition across different informants' narratives.

Subsequently, in the *data display* stage, the coded data were structured into visual formats such as matrices, diagrams, and conceptual maps to support pattern identification and relational analysis. Axial coding was employed to explore connections between categories, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships shaping the studied phenomenon. This analysis revealed broader patterns in informants' experiences, perceptions, and contextual influences by clustering related themes. The final stage, *conclusion drawing with verification*, was conducted alongside the coding process to ensure analytical rigor. Constant comparative analysis was used to cross-check interpretations, refine thematic categorizations, and maintain internal consistency in the research findings. Data source triangulation was utilized by comparing and cross-verifying information from multiple sources. This approach integrated interviews and observational data to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. By juxtaposing participants' narratives with observed behaviors and contextual conditions, any inconsistencies or discrepancies in the data could be identified and addressed, ensuring a more comprehensive and accurate analysis.

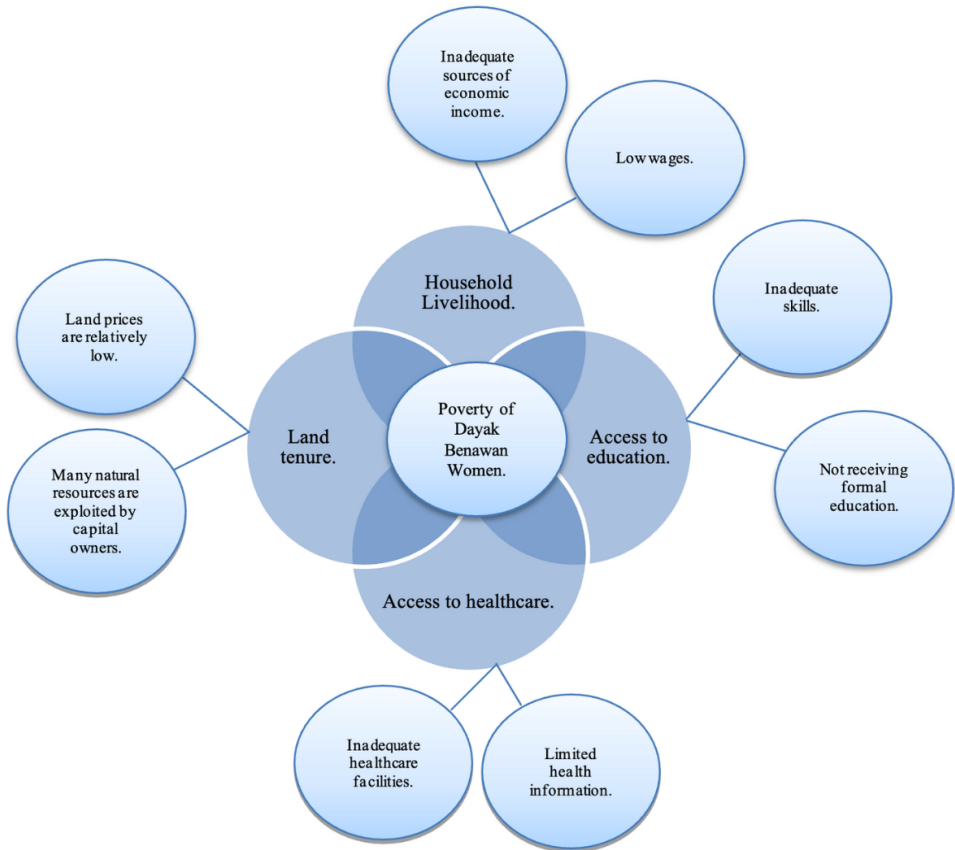
Results and Discussion

Research findings in the Dayak Benawan customary area highlight the limited access of Dayak Benawan women to essential resources for household economic security, land ownership, higher formal education, and health information, as illustrated in Figure 1. Dayak Benawan women face barriers in securing stable income sources, as traditional roles, limited market access, and inadequate financial support often restrict their economic opportunities. These constraints not only affect their individual livelihoods but also contribute to broader cycles of economic vulnerability within their communities. Sen (2001; 2008) classifies gender inequality into several categories, including access to basic facilities, unique opportunities, ownership, and household dynamics. Gender disparities in education are particularly significant due to their direct impact on human capital development (Salatin & Shaaeri, 2015).

Additionally, land ownership remains a significant challenge for Dayak Benawan women. Customary land tenure systems, coupled with legal and bureaucratic obstacles, often limit their ability to claim and manage land, reducing their economic independence. Furthermore, access to higher formal education and health information is restricted, leaving many women with limited knowledge about their rights, financial opportunities, and critical health services. The lack of these fundamental resources reinforces their marginalization and restricts their ability to improve their socioeconomic conditions.

Figure 1

Multidimensional Model Poverty Trap of Dayak Benawan Women



Household Livelihood of Dayak Benawan Community

Based on observation, the Dayak Benawan community in Cowet Village primarily relies on *kume'k* (shifting cultivation) and *motong'k* (rubber tapping) for their livelihoods. Each household generates an average income of around 20,000.00 IDR or less per day. During the rainy season, residents are unable to tap rubber, resulting in no income for the day. Their agricultural system is primarily subsistence-based, focusing on producing food solely for family consumption rather than for sale (Niko, 2023). The rice harvested is intended to meet the household's needs, with no history of selling the rice produced from their fields. This practice is deeply rooted in the belief among the Dayak Benawan community that rice will "cry" if sold.

Interview data show that rubber tapping serves as the main livelihood in the community, providing essential cash income and household goods for the Dayak Benawan families. Rubber has been a key commodity for the community since transitioning from foraging, hunting, and nomadic lifestyles. Rubber was a primary crop before the emergence of oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan (Peluso, 2009; Potter, 2009; Potter, 2015; Semedi, 2022). It is considered a crucial cash crop, predating the introduction of oil palm cultivation in the region.

Tajik teng nadama samei, memang kaki pemotongk, petani ha petani pont gatah.

[TRANSLATION]

Since the time of our ancestors, rubber tapping has been the primary profession; we are farmers, specifically rubber farmers. (*inf.01*)

Based on observations, the majority of the Dayak Benawan community in Pejalu works as farmers, based on the occupation column of their national identity cards (KTP). The primary occupation in this context is rubber tapping, given that rubber is a commodity with significant market value. In contrast, rice farming is generally not considered a main profession because the rice cultivated in their fields serves primarily as a staple food source for the family. The rice farming sector in Southeast Asia is a longstanding tradition that must be preserved, sustained, and actively promoted to ensure its continuity and cultural significance (Phuong, 2024).

The Dayak Benawan families heavily rely on weather conditions for their household income. Rubber tapping cannot occur during rain, as the latex will mix with rainwater. Additionally, during prolonged dry seasons, latex production declines due to the drying of the tree trunks. This condition leads to fluctuations in their monthly income, as extended periods of rainy days within the same month can disrupt their earnings, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Monthly Income Accumulation of Dayak Benawan Families (Non-Oil Palm Income Sources)

Families Sample	Income (Approximately)	Additional income (Approximately)	Total
1	Rp. 180.000	Rp. 40.000	Rp. 220.000
2	Rp. 190.000	Rp. 30.000	Rp. 220.000
3	Rp. 150.000	-	Rp. 150.000
4	Rp. 200.000	Rp. 50.000	Rp. 250.000
5	Rp. 220.000	-	Rp. 220.000
6	Rp. 180.000	-	Rp. 180.000

Source: Field Observation, 2019

Income observations within families were conducted for all participants. Among the 20 participants, some were mothers and children, while others were siblings, resulting in observations being carried out across six distinct families. The observation data shows that Dayak Benawan families do not have a fixed income, and their household expenditures also depend on unpredictable consumption patterns. This uncertainty affects their consumption capabilities, limiting their ability to purchase vegetables and meat for meals. Meat, such as chicken and pork, is typically consumed only during religious celebrations like Easter and Christmas, resulting in substantial expenses during these occasions. They typically slaughter chickens they have raised themselves. On ordinary days, they rely on vegetables sourced from their fields and forests.

Interview data show that the division of roles among the Dayak Benawan community is primarily based on physical capabilities. Men are perceived as stronger and thus suited for heavy labor, while women are deemed less physically capable and assigned lighter tasks. Furthermore, cultural norms surrounding marriage, as articulated by the traditional leaders of the community, emphasize that men should not allow women to perform strenuous activities, such as repairing roofs or cultivating fields.

Ka pelajer na kawen kan da jelas kuni muah, narai ngan nana hak sama-sama kereja ka dio. Ngen tadi, kereja nana ngan narai kan ayek sama.

[TRANSLATION]

In marriage customs, it is articulated that men should not burden women with heavy labor unless absolutely necessary. Within the household, men and women complement each other; thus, their roles in labor also reflect this complementary relationship, ensuring that their tasks differ accordingly. (*Inf.06*)

The division of roles between men and women within Dayak Benawan families, as stated by the community leaders, is a tradition that has been passed down through generations. For the Dayak Benawan, this tradition represents an unwritten rule of life that is strictly adhered to by the community alongside customary practices (Niko, 2019; 2024). Consequently, the economic institutions within Dayak Benawan families are a product of the traditions they have inherited over time.

While women are often socially constructed to work only in domestic spheres, the Dayak Benawan community challenges this norm by recognizing women's roles as income earners (Niko, 2020). This shift reflects a transformation in community perceptions of women, where economic necessities compel them to share the financial burden with their husbands. Consequently, women in the Dayak Benawan community are socially constructed as key contributors to their families' economies rather than mere supporters. The traditional symbol of women being relegated to the home and solely receiving financial support has evolved, highlighting their essential role as active earners.

Suami dan istri same-same lah nyari duit. Kalo ndak sama-sama kerja, mana lah cukup pendapatan suami. Disini, laki perempuan same jak bah kerjanya. Di kebun kah motongk, atau di ladang kah, same jak.

[TRANSLATION]

Both husbands and wives work together to earn money for the family, contributing jointly to meet their household needs. In this context, both men and women are viewed as collaborators in their labor, whether in the rubber plantations (tapping rubber) or in the fields. (*inf.03*)

Based on the interview results, families with young children and elderly parents at home demonstrate a shared approach to fulfilling the family's emotional needs. The gathering of resources is conducted alternately, without designating anyone as the "primary provider" or "supporter" within the household. For instance, *Inf.13* and *Inf.18*, who care for their elderly parent at home, take turns tapping rubber to meet their household's economic needs. For example, *Inf.13* taps rubber for two days a week, while *Inf.18* taps for three days a week. *Rola-Rubzen et al. (2023)* highlights that women's overall well-being plays a significant role in driving rural transformation.

According to Sen (2004), women experiencing poverty in specific circumstances often face absolute poverty not because they are incapable of meeting their basic needs but because they lack entitlements—socially enforceable claims. As Gasper (2020) explains, entitlements refer to the ability to differentiate various social groups based on factors beyond income or economic class. These entitlements encompass occupational roles, gender dynamics, and other social determinants that shape individuals' access to resources and opportunities. Recognizing these distinctions is crucial for understanding how social structures influence economic and social inequalities.

In the Dayak Benawan community, economically disadvantaged women are disproportionately affected by the exploitation of natural resources by capital owners, who capitalize on weak regulatory protections and limited local bargaining power. This systemic exploitation not only deepens their economic vulnerability but also restricts their access to essential resources needed for sustainable livelihoods (Niko et al., 2024). The destruction of the environment through the contamination

of harmful chemicals threatens their livelihoods, affecting not only humans but also animals and plants. Dayak Benawan women find themselves powerless, caught in a situation where they are both impoverished and vulnerable while extracting natural resources, which serves as a means of survival. This implies that they are reduced to objects or agents of the palm oil expansion within their ancestral lands, with capital owners profiting from every inch of developed land.

Dayak Benawan Women's Access to Formal Education

Access to formal education for Dayak Benawan women remains significantly limited due to structural, economic, and cultural barriers. Geographic isolation and inadequate educational infrastructure in customary areas make it difficult for young girls to attend school consistently. Economic hardship forces many Dayak Benawan girls to contribute to household income from an early age, further limiting their opportunities to pursue higher education. Beyond economic constraints, systemic discrimination also hinders educational access for Dayak Benawan women. The integration of Indigenous knowledge with formal education is minimal, making schooling seem detached from their lived realities.

Asi na nen ingak sekolah beh? Pesti asi pun galak sekolah sengak ade biaya. Ken mino pas tamat sekolah sangat aus lanjut kuliah, aus yak kursus komputer ngak duwek, tapi ngen lah aja biaya. Nadama ayek mampu mbiaya. Mino sempet yak kuliah sambel kereja kan, tapi meker-meker agik, mending duit asel kereja nyah nadama ka dio.

[TRANSLATION]

Who would not want to go to school? I mean, who would not want to go to school? I am sure everyone would if only they could afford it. When I finished high school, I wanted to continue my education or at least take a computer course. However, the main obstacle was, of course, money. My parents could not afford to support me. I thought about financing my own education, maybe working while studying, but in the end, I decided it would be better to use my earnings to help my parents back in the village. (*Inf.08*)

Inf.08 shared how much she longed for higher education in the past. After graduating from high school, she was determined to continue her studies, even going as far as persuading her parents and trying to work to save enough money for college registration fees. However, her efforts were ultimately hindered by economic constraints and the prohibitively high cost of tuition.

Inf.08 story is not an isolated case. In Cowet Village, with a population of 1,538, a significant portion of the residents have not received formal education (Cowet Village Official Data, 2020). Most of those who dropped out of school cite financial difficulties as the primary reason. For many families, the cost of education beyond elementary school— including junior high and high school— becomes a heavy burden. The high cost of education correlates closely with the geographic conditions. The lack of infrastructure and resources for transportation to and from school is one of the primary barriers. Walking such a long distance from the village to school is not viable, making access to education difficult for the community.

Based on the remote situation, girls in the Southeast Asia region faced additional barriers to schooling (Dabrowski et al., 2024). They were often not allowed to attend school if no other children from the village were continuing their formal education, primarily due to safety concerns. Parents were reluctant to let their daughters walk through forests alone to reach school without companions, which further restricted access to education for girls. In assessing capabilities, Sen (1989; 1999) argues that education and life expectancy are crucial elements in understanding gender inequality. These factors significantly impact women's capabilities to achieve overall well-being.

Moreover, Sen (1999) argues that access to education significantly enhances women's agency,

empowering them to engage more actively in economic and social decision-making processes. The lack of formal education for Dayak Benawan women restricts their ability to broaden their choices and improve their socioeconomic conditions. As noted by Sen (1989), without adequate educational access, these women find themselves trapped in a cycle of dependency, perpetuating existing patterns of marginalization and economic vulnerability— an issue also seen among marginalized girls in Indonesia (Dabrowski et al., 2024).

In addition, Dayak Benawan women in Cowet Village are more likely to engage in work than pursue formal education. Observations reveal that the highest level of education they typically attain is junior high school (SMP). This is largely due to the increasing financial burden associated with continuing education, including costs for uniforms, school meals, books, and other supplies.

With their parents' income insufficient to cover these educational expenses, many young girls transition into the workforce early. They are encouraged to participate in tapping rubber and working in the fields, a practice that has become a norm within the community. This shift not only eases the financial strain on families but also provides a new source of labor to support household livelihoods.

Sen's (1985) capability approach examines women's formal rights, including their access to formal education, by assessing their ability to convert resources and legal rights into functionings. Initially, the concept of 'capability' was closely linked to 'well-being freedom'— the extent to which an individual can attain life outcomes that are rationally valued for themselves (Sen, 1985), particularly in relation to studies on hunger. As Dabrowski et al. (2024) stated, barriers to education in Indonesia limit marginalized girls' capabilities, restricting their socioeconomic opportunities.

Dayak Benawan Women's Access to Health Facilities and Information

The Benawan community continues to rely on ancestral traditions as their primary method of traditional healing. For the Benawan people, healing the sick involves a form of negotiation with spirits to return the patient's soul to their body. Shamans are believed to act as intermediaries between the spirit world and the physical realm, making them essential for conducting these healing rituals.

The animistic and dynamistic beliefs that shaped the Dayak Benawan people's past still influence their social lives today. Despite advancements in modern medicine and access to sophisticated medical equipment, many Benawan individuals continue to trust shamans for treating illnesses. Since 2013, a village health post (Poskesdes) has operated in Cowet Village. Initially, the assigned midwife provides services from a resident's home. By 2018, a dedicated health post building was established within the village office, and it currently employs two midwives who work on a rotational basis.

Access to basic healthcare remains a significant challenge for the Dayak Benawan people in Pejalu, particularly due to the considerable distance between their village and the subdistrict's community health center (Puskesmas). While the Poskesdes are located within the village, only a small fraction of the Dayak Benawan population in Pejalu Village possesses specific social guarantees, such as the Indonesian Health Card (Kartu Indonesia Sehat or KIS). Holders of this card can access free healthcare services at the Puskesmas, but its limited distribution highlights persistent barriers to equitable healthcare access. The neglect of women's roles in development programs has severely impacted their access to healthcare. For instance, women and girls in South Asia face significantly higher mortality rates than men (Sen, 1973). A similar trend can be seen in Indonesia, where maternal mortality continues to be a significant concern, with a maternal mortality ratio of 173 deaths per 100,000 live births recorded in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, chronic diseases accounted for 21.2% of female deaths, in contrast to 17.8% for males (World Health Organization, 2019).

The phrase "missing women", introduced by Sen (1989, p. 29) to describe the disproportionately

high mortality rates among girls and women in parts of Asia and Africa, highlights the persistence of systemic poverty in these regions. To this day, inadequate access to healthcare remains an unresolved issue. This neglect reflects a significant disparity in female survival rates compared to expected figures if men and women had equal access to healthcare, medical treatment, and nutrition (Sen, 1989).

Some of Dayak Benawan cannot afford to visit a doctor due to the high cost of medical treatment. Limited financial resources often compel them to forgo accessing basic healthcare services, prioritizing other needs instead. One common sentiment reflects, *“It is better to use the money to buy food for the family rather than spending it on medical treatment.”* Due to the high cost of accessing modern healthcare services, the Dayak Benawan community *Hadith* means of treating illnesses, as depicted in Figure 2.

Dayak Benawan people also rely on their knowledge of forest plants to prepare natural remedies, which reduces their perceived need for professional healthcare unless the illness is severe. Among Dayak Benawan women, healthcare services are typically accessed only in cases of severe illness. For them, severe sickness often means being bedridden for three days, a situation they have normalized as part of everyday life.

Access to healthcare is regarded as a fundamental capability that enables individuals, especially women, to lead dignified and productive lives (Sen, 1999). Sen’s (1989) work discusses how limited access to healthcare services can restrict women’s participation in economic and social activities, reinforcing gender-based disparities. This idea is also relevant to the experiences of Dayak Benawan women, whose healthcare challenges contribute to broader inequalities. Additionally, the reliance on traditional healing methods exemplifies what Sen (1973) describes as adaptive preferences, where marginalized communities adjust their expectations based on structural constraints rather than their actual well-being.

Figure 2

Betamba (Ritual Healing of Dayak Benawan)



Source: Researcher Documentation (2022)

Even in such cases, their first response is not to seek help from healthcare providers but to call a *dukun* (traditional healer) to their home. This practice applies regardless of the severity of the illness— whether it is minor ailments like fever, chills, headaches, or more serious conditions that leave a person unable to get out of bed. Traditional healing remains the preferred first-line treatment for significant illnesses, reflecting deeply rooted cultural beliefs and practices.

Dayak Benawan Women's Access to Land Ownership

The local community utilizes nearly every aspect of the land and water. Fertile soil supports the cultivation of vegetables, corn, and tubers, while the water bodies— rivers, lakes, and canals— are abundant with various fish species. These freshwater fish thrive in close proximity to residential areas, making them easily accessible.

Nature provides an array of resources to meet the community's needs. However, a fundamental principle governs their relationship with the environment: they must not take more than necessary. This practice ensures sustainable use of resources, aligning with their traditional values and respect for nature.

Gik samei laba anak ha betukar laba ngak aus. Ken ade siyap, sanek ade inyoh, anak betukar siyap ngan inyoh. Ngan anak manang gik samei, na ka ngun berikant, nge ikant belayek betukar ngan buah cayong nen belayek aja.

[TRANSLATION]

In the past, people exchanged and depended on each other. I have chickens, and my neighbor has coconuts. I exchange my chickens for several mature coconuts. Alternatively, with the sea people in Manang— they have fish because they rely on fishing, and they trade their fish for pumpkins that they do not have. (Inf. 11)

From interviews with older members of the Benawan community (Inf.11), their past experiences highlight a tradition of continuous bartering. This exchange system was an integral part of their traditional way of life, reflecting their communal values. Over time, however, this practice has gradually been replaced by monetary transactions as the concept of buying and selling with money gained prominence. In contrast to the present, people of that time were less focused on material possessions, and economic worth was not exclusively defined in monetary terms (Reginio & Agcaoili, 2024).

This system of borrowing farmland did not operate on profit-sharing principles but rather stemmed from familial and communal bonds between landowners and borrowers. As a gesture of gratitude, the borrower would allocate a portion of their harvested rice to the landowner. While not mandatory, this act symbolized respect and appreciation for the generosity of the landowner.

The livelihood crisis in Benawan eventually led to the conversion of their land for oil palm plantations, starting around 2009 or 2010. Through the head of Cowet Village, the benefits of oil palm as a sustainable cash crop were promoted to some of the villagers. At the time, corporations offered to purchase the land from the community, but most people rejected the idea. Despite the failure of the companies to establish their presence in the village, the community started to plant oil palms in their personal gardens and former fields.

The concept of land leasing is foreign to Dayak Benawan traditions. Even if they did not own land, they could borrow land from other family members without any payment. Usually, the only compensation was a share of the harvested rice, driven by familial ties. This capitalist relationship, as defined by Li (2020), refers to a system with an imbalance of private ownership of the means of production (land, capital), and a non-owning group is forced to sell labor and use capital to generate profit under competitive conditions.

Based on interview data, the Dayak Benawan forest had no concept of land ownership in the past. Everyone living in Kampung Pejalu had equal rights to manage the forest for farming. However, since the 1990s, during the New Order regime, the community began marking their land by placing markers on their former fields. The first person to cultivate the land would become the owner, and they planted sago trees as boundary markers between their land and that of others.

The land ownership system is based on the ancestral lineage of the first individuals who cultivated the land. With land prices relatively high, particularly for productive ventures such as oil palm plantations, some Benawan people have even engaged in conflicts among siblings within a single family regarding land ownership. The inheritance of parental land is usually determined upon the parents' passing, but there are instances where siblings dispute the distribution if one receives a smaller portion (Niko et al., 2024). In terms of land ownership, Dayak Benawan women are not granted rights, as only men are allowed to inherit land within the family. A study by Rola-Rubzen et al. (2024) highlights that women's ownership of land and assets and investments in their education and healthcare significantly contribute to rural transformation. These factors not only enhance women's economic empowerment but also foster broader socioeconomic development within rural communities (Ariffin et al., 2020; Sbicca, 2012).

Sen's studies (1990; 2004) highlight that women within households engage in negotiations regarding their well-being, including their access to resources. In this context, land ownership is a critical resource for Indigenous Dayak Benawan women, as their family's well-being is often assessed based on their ability to cultivate land. Women's negotiation over property ownership within the household frequently reflects the extent to which they compromise their well-being for the sake of other family members. Their overall welfare is largely influenced by their degree of economic dependence and culturally constructed perceptions of what constitutes a meaningful contribution (Sen, 2004).

The situation where the Benawan people, albeit unwittingly, become accomplices in the destruction and pollution of their environment by capital owners, all while being promised profits, is concerning. This situation correlates with the notion that women bear the brunt of climate change costs and unpredictable disasters (Onwutuebe, 2019; Osman-Elasha, 2020; Tanjeela & Rutherford, 2018). In reality, the non-material losses experienced by Dayak Benawan women have not occurred suddenly; instead, they are now becoming evident. They no longer feel safe consuming river water for drinking and cooking, their rice fields become unmanageable during prolonged dry seasons due to drought and poor soil fertility, and some Benawan households have lost their rubber plantations to palm oil farms, in addition to facing unpredictable flooding disasters.

According to Ribot and Peluso's (2003) access theory, the findings highlight significant inequalities in women's access to property and their position within power networks, where they are systematically marginalized. This marginalization is particularly evident in the case of Benawan women, who are deprived of land ownership rights, limiting their ability to control and benefit from natural resources. As a result, the absence of legally recognized property rights not only weakens their economic security but also facilitates the exploitation of land by external capital owners, leading to extensive land-use changes that prioritize commercial interests over environmental sustainability. The unrestricted access granted to these external actors accelerates environmental degradation, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of Benawan women, who rely heavily on their surrounding ecosystems for subsistence and cultural practices. Without meaningful legal recognition and structural support, their exclusion from land ownership continues to reinforce gendered inequalities and perpetuate the cycle of environmental and socioeconomic marginalization.

Sen (2012) argues that poverty extends beyond low income and encompasses various forms

of unfreedom that hinder individuals, particularly women, from achieving a decent quality of life. Contributing factors include limited access to education, inadequate healthcare facilities, scarcity of essential medicines, gender discrimination, unsafe living conditions, and restricted employment opportunities. These structural constraints further exacerbate their vulnerability and diminish their overall well-being.

Conclusion

The study's emergent synthesis derived from the analysis culminates that the root causes of multidimensional poverty among Dayak Benawan women stem from their limited access to productive resources. These constraints include restricted access to sustainable livelihoods, formal education, healthcare facilities, and land ownership. Sen (1989; 1999; 2001) argues that limited access to education has profound implications for all aspects of women's lives, as education serves as a fundamental source of empowerment, enabling women to strengthen their resources and capacities.

The restricted access of Dayak Benawan women to land management has further exacerbated their impoverishment. This is evident in the limited opportunities available for women to cultivate land within their ancestral territories, which have been increasingly dominated by palm oil plantations— a system largely governed by patriarchal land management structures. Ensuring women's participation in land ownership and decision-making processes is crucial for their economic and social empowerment. Moreover, equitable access to healthcare and education will enhance their overall well-being and provide them with greater opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

Understanding the multidimensional poverty experienced by Indigenous women requires an examination of their limited access to resources that could empower them. Sen (2012) describes this as a form of unfreedom, which extends beyond economic constraints to restrict overall well-being and opportunities for a better life. Addressing Indigenous women's multidimensional poverty necessitates policy frameworks that promote their empowerment. This includes recognizing their collective rights, safeguarding local livelihoods, and prioritizing their inclusion in empowerment programs at both national and local policy levels.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

AI Disclosure

I declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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