

## **Ginger Torch Flower (Unji): The Identity of Women's Agency in The National Park**

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to analyze women's organizing and agency in the preservation of Kerinci Seblat National Park (KSNP), Indonesia. Since the Dutch colonial government, the forest has gradually lost its natural function as tropical forest. Various corporations have received concessions, in consequences deforesting the area. Wood and other materials from the forest have been aggressively exploited to meet market demands. Post Indonesia's independency, national authority then defined it as national park. For the women around this area, this national park acts as a storehouse where they pick up the materials to fulfil their daily needs of food and medicine. This practice is rooted in their cultural and historical backgrounds. This study uses the Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) approach and it applies feminist ethnography methods such as FGDs, in-depth interviews, and participant observations for data collection. It provides analyses of the linkages between ecology and political economy as well as the gendered context of these relations. This study shows that local women manage to improve their position on forest governance by creating a peaceful movement to gain access to the forest so that they can raise and utilize ginger torch flowers. The women traditionally use these flowers to make snack for their families, access to the forest enables them to continue this role. By successfully negotiating for forest rights, they demonstrate their agency in conserving the forest. They build networks to other villages, push local and national government authorities to make policies on forest rights, invite the media to expose their activism, and strengthen collaborations with research groups from universities.*

**Keywords:** *women's agency, identity, Kerinci Seblat National Park (KSNP), Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), engendering conservation policy*

### **1. Introduction**

Studies on women's roles and agencies in conservation of national park forests are limited. At the global level there are several studies that have been conducted (Fonjong 2008; Davidson and Black 2010; Wan, Colfer and Powell 2011; Sharma 2017). Wan et al. (2011) suggests that conservation intersects with socio-cultural situations, livelihoods, environmental conditions and women health. Women's gendered responsibility to meet family needs produce ecological knowledge, especially that connected to forest conservation.

In India, there is Forest Right Acts (FRA) that can be utilized to reinforce Indian women's roles living around forests and conservation to actively engaged in the forest conservation (Sharma 2017). FRA also provides a breakthrough in create a women-

oriented farm scheme to provide access to land ownership for women, as well as space for them to have agency in conservation.

Fonjong study in Cameroon (2008) shows that without gender analysis in assessing natural resources, conservation effort does not only harm local female dwellers, but it also widens the gaps in resource governance. Gender gaps in natural resource governance have a significant effect on policy outputs. Besides the study report in Cameroon, there is another study in Australia, where the dominance of male staff in natural resources management results in a gender-biased policies and social injustice (Davidson and Black 2010).

These previous studies suggest that women's involvement has pivotal roles in forest conservation, including the conservation of national park such as Kerinci Seblat National Park (KSNP), Indonesia. KSNP is one of the largest national parks in this zone, it covers 13,750 km<sup>2</sup>, and it encompasses four administrative provinces: West Sumatra, Jambi, South Sumatra and Bengkulu (Wikipedia Indonesia).<sup>1</sup>

A study conducted by Hidayat et al (2011) suggests that maintaining a national park is not only the responsibilities of the National and Regional Governments, but also those of donor agencies, NGOs, and other parties. However, these agenda are full of conflicts of interest, for example the interests of Central Government are to maintain the park as a conservation area and the central government delegates this task to the local government. Yet, not all of the local governments are capable to fund the conservation programs.

Indications of the conflicts of interests in TNKS have been recorded in Hendrastiti and Santoso study (2009). The study shows that there is a conflict of interest between indigenous people and government authorities on natural resource management policies. It notes that women's access to engage in forest protection is also low. The relationships between forest and women are often underappreciated.

## 2. Methodology

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) has encouraged the emergence of numerous studies on gender and environmental issues. By emphasizing on women's engagement as political actors, agents of environmental change, guardians of the nature, the research within the framework of FPE provides a revolutionary model of study in political ecology (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996; Sundberg 2015).

Based on FPE framework, gender diversity and gender relations are determined by political ecological relations that are explored through three main areas: (1) gendered environmental knowledge and practices); (2) gendered natural rights and unequal vulnerability to environmental change; and (3) gendered environmental activism and organizations (Sundberg 2015).

Furthermore, the development of the FPE methodology could be referred from studies of Sultana (2007); Nightingale (2011); Nightingale dan Rankin (2014); Sundberg (2015); Gradskova dan Morell (2019); Sreerekha (2018); Mollet dan Faria (2013); Velicu (2018); Kubisa and Wojnicka (2018). There are also studies based on Indonesia cases such as Elmhirst (2011a); Hendrastiti (2019); Hendrastiti and Kusdinar (2019); Hendrastiti and Kusujarti (2018) that could be used as FPE references. Studies based on FPE framework amplify women's agencies and put women at the center stage. This study follows the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taman\\_Nasional\\_Kerinci\\_Seblat](https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taman_Nasional_Kerinci_Seblat)

pattern but it analyzes women's agency in the forest management that has not been addressed sufficiently by previous studies.

Subjects in this study are women's groups, local level state actors, low-level bureaucrats, and traditional leaders. We decided to focus on these groups because they are integrated into the fabrics of the socio-economic life and culture of the community that we examine. These subjects are also knowledgeable of the study issue. Furthermore, it is necessary to promote a feminism awareness in environmental studies.

The research applies interviews, non-participant observations, short live-in, and focus group discussions along with the use of dioramas in which the participants describe and draw certain ideas and concepts based on their experience and perceptions. We conduct role plays to understand how the women embody and express their experiences. These methods help us obtain information on how the participants formulate and redefine conservation concepts and give meaning to women's agency. Furthermore, the field narratives provide evidence of women's masteries of knowledge and experiences of gendered based environmental management. The analysis of the narratives shows that women's experiences are intersected with social class and authority.

The study notes that communication technology plays role to help various groups of local women gaining public's sympathy and support. The use of social media, news reports, and existing networks play important roles in disseminating the roles and agencies of the women. The local movement is capable of creating networks through virtual alliances and reaching out to authorities at the local and higher levels partly with the supports from non-governmental organizations and other groups that serve as mediators in this process. This study enables us to uncover hidden facts that otherwise difficult to unearth. It leads us to understand the socio-political construction of gender relations and forest management from the micro level of daily practice; including revealing competing claims of authorities, and observing the process of renewing, reproducing, empowering local institutions that are pivotal in the forest park management.

### **3. Findings: Women's Agency in KSNP**

#### **3.1 Interplay of Feminist Ethnography and the Findings**

The research is an evolving process and serves as a tool for reflection and transformation from practice; it is a relationship between practices and topic of the study. Every stage of the field work, discussion and reflection always were carried out to enrich the study findings and create understanding of some limitations of the research instruments. It is different from previous research addressing forest conservation.

Studies of national parks, conservation forests, and protected forests are not new in Indonesia, but most of the studies do not incorporate women's perspective, feminist perspectives are still very limited. That is why it is urgent to engage feminist study in conducting research on the environment. Most research designs and programs of national park managements remain gender biased and negate the existence of women inhabitants. In fact, all of the villages around the national park are inhabited by women who have the knowledge of the forest and the drives to perform forest conservation, the backbone of social resilience for environmental and climate changes that occur.

The study of women's agency on KSNP area, especially in Rejang Lebong Regency, is a multi-year study from 2018 up to now. Other past studies (Novra et al 2007; Novra and Farhan 2009; Hidayat et al 2011) tend to focus on conservation studies and the physical aspect of the protected forests without providing in-depth analyses of the social factors. If

there are socio-economic studies, most of them left aside the socio-cultural aspects, even less common are studies that put their focus on women. Studies with FPE approach are rare and it is not common for policies to use this approach as a basis for consideration.

This study is a result of a collaborative production from various resource persons who have been encountered during the research. Interpretation process of the findings is the result of discussion, negotiation, and reflection of experiences while examining the phenomenon on the field site. As has been emphasized by Mohanty (2003), researchers' sensitivity to local knowledge and ecological political sketches is very important.

The principle that needs to be highlighted here is respect and caution towards local resource person. It needs to be noted that the research team is not NGO activists who are fighting for and promoting new forms of democracy (Sundberg 2004). According to Sundberg, by applying an epistemology of feminist ecology politics, all research subjects are met at a meeting point called *intersectionality*, and produce a friendly collective knowledge.

As Nightingale and Rankin (2014: 112) suggest, in feminist study the methodology itself represents a unique research commitment where all parties involved in the study put themselves as collaborators in producing knowledge, all parties become owners of the knowledge found during fieldwork process. Even in the field, the team was assisted by research assistants and mediators, who accelerate the rapport process with local subjects, as well as provide their knowledge and insights on the core topics of the study. This process offers significant contribution during preparation stages, especially in enriching the researchers' socio-cultural knowledge of the local community to be visited. In this research, we follow these processes and principles.

### **3.2 Women's Agency and Narratives**

The methodological elements and values described above take place in our field study. Stories about *Komunitas Perempuan Peduli Lingkungan/KPPL* (a Women's Group for Environmental Awareness) is a very important element for making FPE analysis. Our methods enable us to listen and learn from the women's narratives who are the members of KPPL. Originally, the KPPL is a group of women from a village around KSNP, called Desa Pal 8. One day LiVE, an NGO invited them to take part in a training for conservation. Some of the participants felt "*click*" with the training, it fits with their desire to engage in preserving the national forest park around them. They learned much about empowering themselves, as well as creating a possible new space to engage in managing the park. They then participate in follow up the trainings, these trainings enhance their awareness of the rights to utilize the forest while also conserving it, they especially are interested in involving in the cultivation of non-timber crops. This stage is very crucial, as to achieve these goals they have to advocate for their rights to some levels of authorities. Fieldnotes describe that access to non-timber farming serves as an entry point for advocating their rights to the national forest. The rights for women to access the forest and to have active involvement in the conservation of the forest will definitely be the basis for the change in the position of women, both within their communities and the state. After series of negotiations, KPPL manages to gain formal access to the national forest. These further empower the women and amplify their voices and agencies.

A strong social capital facilitates KPPL's ability to organize itself and to advocate for their rights. This social capital is fully supported by the local authorities - namely the Village Head and her apparatus. In the Indonesia context, support from the village head is

a key element in the organization and development of the women's community. In Pal 8 where KPPL is located, the village head is a woman. This woman village head has been active in various programs for enhancing women's roles and capacities. Based on the analyses of the dynamic of relationship between KPPL and the roles of the village head, we identify three important points. First, women's leadership at the local level is key and becomes an important social capital for the conservation movement. The female leadership is also the glue for creating social solidarity among community members, especially for the fellow women. Secondly, the village head is also a member of the *KPPL*. So, there is no doubt about her commitment, ideology, perspective, and interests to the *KPPL*. She has a huge contribution to strengthen, mobilize and expand support to the *KPPL* as a new women's organization. Thirdly, *KPPL* management is separated from the village authorities and government; this small organization is fast growing (Hendrastiti and Kusdinar 2019) and more independent from the local political influence.

*KPPL* also receives strong support from its networks of local organizations. The civil society organizations help build and enhance the capacities of *KPPL*, for example they facilitate some dialogues between *KPPL* and Local Authorities, other community groups around the national park, academicians, and donors. Focus of the dialogue connects to emerging issues concerning the national forest (KSNP). *KPPL* also received some training to increase their capacity to plant and manage non-timber crops, especially ginger torch flowers. *KPPL* is a close friend of a local young activist (*KPPSWD*), a peasant group, and a village women's organizations affiliated to government (*PKK* or Government's Family Welfare Program). Strong support and network from the local community is required for the women's organizations such as *KPPL* to sustain and flourish given the fact that the community generally still holds patriarchal values.

Internal organizational development begins by developing an organizational bylaw. To draft the bylaw, *KPPL* receives assistance from an NGO called *LiVE*. In the process of drafting the bylaw, they have read other organizations' bylaws as references. However, they use farmer's organization bylaw as an example because there is limited example that they can use to come-up with their own bylaw. Unfortunately, most of the examples have gender bias. They have little reference that use gender justice perspective, especially for organizations focusing on the local community's rights to forests and ecological politics. This means that *KPPL* needs to be innovative and develops its own bylaw according to their missions to create gender justice.

*KPPL* members realize that their involvement in the national forest or KSNP area requires a strong commitment to conserve the forest and maintain its sustainability. The organization's platform is ensuring women's rights to preserve and utilize the national parks and forest, especially their ability to manage non-timber forest products. To achieve these goals, they start by striving to get permission to cultivate *unji*. *Unji* flowers are the choice of the women's group because they grow abundantly in the national forest park and the women have existing knowledge about the flower and how to use it. The flower grows wild in the area, village women around the forest pick them up and use them for their daily needs, such as cooking them to make curry, salad, snacks, syrup, and other food stocks. This is one of the women's movement strategies; they build the movement by framing it as food issues. In the social environment that is relatively masculine, the governance of national park tends to be the same. Women's rights to forest are limited. Before the *KPPL* movement, no women group had obtained a permit to utilize non-timber products. *KPPL* was aware of the obstacle, so they chose the entrance way to access forest rights with female stereotyping roles, foodstuffs and cooking. By naming the forest as a storehouse or

food sources, it is easier to gain the forest rights; it is accepted by the authorities. By framing their movement as a struggle to gain access to their food sources, the women's group does not directly contest the existing gendered based power.

The ginger torch serves as an identity and driving force of KPPL. The basis or starting point of their advocacy is to ask the national park authority to provide KPPL with a legal access in cultivating the *unji*. The request, perhaps, seems simple; but it is a beginning of their advocacy and struggle to gain access to the forest. By gaining accesses to non-timber forest product management, it can be seen as a form of returning forest authority to the people. The framing also sends a message that not all villagers around the forest are loggers.

This study finds that the local environmental movement is heavily challenged by patriarchal values. Forest management is largely perceived as a male domain, those who have power and authority in this activity are males and the values governing the practices are mostly based on patriarchal principles. However, patriarchal values and practices is not the only obstacles for KPPL, intersectionality of elements in the power structure including class, religion, and ethnicity also create challenges for KPPL in developing and sustaining its movement. Their abilities to overcome their differences and various challenges demonstrate their unified interests and organizational or negotiating skills. By exerting their agencies and voices, KPPL manages to create a shift in the local political relations that indicates the development of 'feminization of political life.' The movement enriches local politics by offering a more progressive and multi-perspective approaches in addressing ecological injustices.

KPPL offers a novel ecological discourse in its narratives that question the dominant discourse and existing 'common sense' knowledge. The movement is called progressive, because they have never given up with some difficulties, they rise some agenda, promote new things that allow them to break through obstacles. They argue that physically living "close" to the park does not automatically mean that it is easier, faster, and affordable for them to access the forest. Unfortunately, access means differently to the "close" proximity in terms of physical distance, from their perspective closeness in this context means access, opportunity, and ability to voice their concern and agencies in managing the national forest. Forest is part of their living cultures, however the opportunity to access it does not come by itself because the state has control over it and does not necessarily give the community the necessary access to it. The local community has to fight for the access to the forest and for their active involvement in the national park conservation.

Furthermore, the study discovers that women need to reformulate their relationship with the national park; because the forests have changed both due to climate change and the activities performed by timber corporations. For KPPL, climate change is a challenge to be response, and again it is a chance to uplift their empowerment. They use their knowledge and experience to conserve the forest and by demonstrating this knowledge and ability to conserve the forest, they convince the state and authority that they can serve as a partner for more sustainable forest conservation.

The struggle for ecological justice requires a reformulation and redefinition of values and practices that harm the position of women and these intersect with other issues such as cultural myths, sexuality and socio-political environments. An example of how KPPL redefines and reformulates existing cultural practice is on how they offer a new perspective on "*Sedekah Bumi*" which literally means 'donation for the earth.' It is an annual traditional ceremony practiced by local farmers on the month of *Muharam* or the month of the Muslim's lunar calendar. This ritual signifies farmers' obligation to sustain

and nurture the earth as the source of their lives and livelihood. Traditionally, the farmers would provide offerings to the earth and perform communal festivities symbolizing their gratitude to the earth.

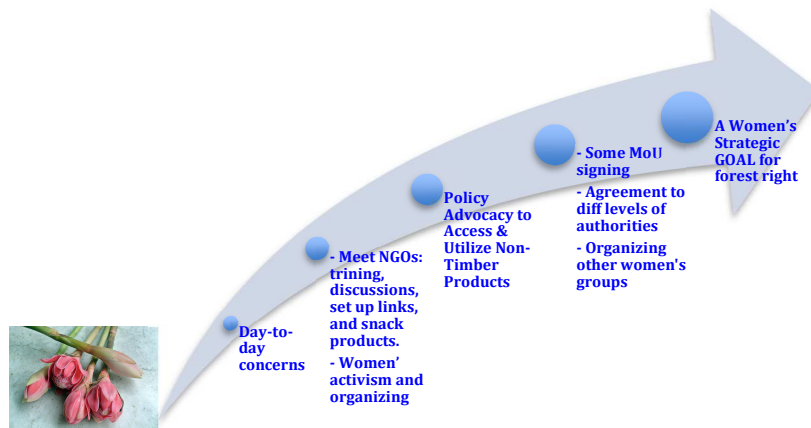
KPPL creates an alternative and redefines this cultural practice by donating and planting trees that they nurture to the community members. KPPL reformulates the local ecological culture, it reinvents the existing cultural values and practice as "*Bersedekah Pohon kepada Bumi*" means donating trees to the earth. The women's group sends a message that they are concerned about endangering the forest life and emphasizes the importance of regenerating and maintaining the forest. As suggested by FPE framework, using their gendered environmental knowledge and practices, KPPL members build their activism to address gendered based vulnerability and ecological injustices. This study offers a unique perspective based on Indonesian specific context and locality to enrich FPE approach.

Previously, there were some classic works by Harding (1998) and Haraway (1988; 1991) which illustrated the invisibility of women's knowledge in many fields of science because women are a relatively subordinated gender. The next generation of feminist theorists have proven that women's knowledge about the nature is very significant. Nightingale's study (2011) notes that women's knowledge accelerates forest regeneration in Nepal. The Velicu study (2018) contributes to explaining the strength of women's resilience to environmental change and environmental justice in Eastern Europe. Similar crucial studies of Sundberg (2015) in India, and Sultana (2007) in Bangladesh, enhance FPE framework and approach in emphasizing on everyday realities and experiences. Our study adds on this by showing how KPPL members use their challenges and knowledge to launch their movement to gain access to the forest.

KPPL activism is one of the FPE phenomena. Other writings in Eastern Europe and Nepal can be used as comparative materials. Study Mollet and Faria (2013) proves the existence of racial and environmental issues in development. Gradskova and Morell (2019) state that ideological changes in state politics threaten the configuration of gender justice, including in natural resource management. Nightingale and Rankin (2014) reinforce the argument about political subjectivity in development. The situation of intersectionality across gender, ethnicity, subaltern agencies, and solidarity are the core factors of justice issues. Sreerexha study (2018) complements the proposition of women's and ecological linkages, relationships between femininity, reproduction and development politics.

In Indonesian context, there are some studies relevant to *KPPL*. Elmhirst's research (2011b) has succeeded in documenting the links between gender, heterosexual marital relations, and forest management policies. Whereas Hendrastiti studies (2014; 2018, 2019) and Hendrastiti and Kusujarti (2018) show that the women's movement against the extractive corporation is a struggle to maintain living space, culture, water, food sovereignty, and opposed to a sort of socio-political colonial relations.

Focus of *KPPL* study is the process of gaining access to forest rights, especially for non-timber crops. Access to national park, through *unji* flower, is a symbol of identity, and a symbol of recognition of the existence of local women's group and knowledge. Public recognition of women's roles symbolizes the agency of local women to the forest ecology. They are sustainable agencies, as they live in the storehouse of this rich ecological environment. The figure below describes several important milestones of *KPPL* in building activism towards ecological and women's justice.



Figur 1: A Milestone of the Local Women's Movement Group to Gain Forest Rights in Kerinci Sebelat National Park (KSNP)

#### 4. Conclusions

This study of local women's movements to fight for forest rights in a village on the outskirts of the national park provides several important points. One of its uniqueness is the use of *unji* flowers as a means of public communication and the starting point for creating interest from the authorities. *Unji* flowers are a symbol of forest food sovereignty since they provide important source of the local diets and have been used by the local women for generations. The group use *unji* to express the identity of the movements. *Unji* as foodstock has multiple meaning; it has a social meaning transcending economic meaning, it symbolizes women's agency and empowerment to ensure their human rights over the forest.

This study adopts an FPE method. In accordance with the FPE framework developed by Rocheleau et.al and Sundberg. The use of FPE approach in a study of national park is important because limited studies, especially those in Indonesia.

Public recognition of women's roles symbolizes the agency of local women to the forest ecology. They are sustainable agencies, as they live in the storehouse of this rich ecological environment. The figure 1 describes several important milestones of KPPL in building activism towards ecological and women's justice. The study reveals that women's situated knowledge tends to be used only as instruments for legitimizing certain policies.

This study fills the gaps in three aspects. First, it closes the gap in the theory of the roles and agencies of women in the forest conservation, particularly women's rights over the national park. Second, filling the gap of women as National Park agency by situating them as the subject of the forest management, as well as by uplifting women's position as important actors. Third, it fills the methodological gap in an environmental study context by making a paradigm shift from positivism-based method to the post positivist approach.

The study shows that women are the subject of forest management, not the object. They are also subjected gendered based cultural taboos, social prohibition, and myths. The everyday life experiences of the women. It is maintaining cosmological values with the environment.

FPE framework suggests that human practices in forest everyday life are formed by gender diversity. Body is not meaningful on its natural basis; but the body is sexed through some rules compiled by medical, social, educational and religious institutions.



These gender-based rules are enacted repeatedly in everyday lives so that they are perceived as indisputable.

Many theories of feminist political ecologists work with participatory or collaborative methodologies to "*find*" the gender gap in governance, right, access and control, and ecological change. Creative methods are also needed to enable research that supports feminist political findings. This research uses this collaborative method and fieldwork has been carried out for multi-years, and through a continuous communication. This study utilizes triangulation of multiple methods including interviews, focus group discussions, performance of familiar social setting using dioramas, observations, and live-in the village. These elements are designed to create more holistic and inclusive research to integrate diverse voices and perspectives.

Facing the deterioration of the environment, the local community as exemplified by KPPL creates an innovative concept of creating environmental justice by redefining and reconstructing social-ecological conditions in their lives. The response of the grassroots community focuses on the efforts to redefine the protection of their identities, and their traditional means of production, practice, knowledge, wealth, and values.

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