

## **Gender Inequality and the Oppression of Women within Minangkabau Matrilineal Society: A Case Study of the Management of *Ulayat* Forest Land in Nagari Bonjol, Dharmasraya District, West Sumatra Province, Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

Gender inequality within the Melayu clan of a Minangkabau matrilineal community in Dharmasraya District, West Sumatra Province in Indonesia, leads to the clan's women experiencing injustice when it comes to the management of communal forest land (*ulayat*). This inequality is most clearly shown in situations in which men sell communal forest land for their own personal interests. Moreover, the distribution of nucleus estate smallholder oil palm plantation (NESHIP) plots disadvantages women. Although these plots are supposed to be distributed fairly among community members, the system used is controlled by the male communal ruler, who holds rights over the community as a whole. The practices used to manage *ulayat* forestland within the Melayu clan prove that women within the matrilineal system used by the Minangkabau group, of which the Melayu clan is a part, are not treated equally in terms of the management of natural resources. This inequality arises due to an imbalance that exists between men and women over the rights they have to manage the *ulayat* forest. The findings of this study challenge previous studies which have suggested that gender inequality is mainly an issue within patrilineal societies; the finding suggests that it also occurs within matrilineal systems such as within the Melayu clan in Bonjol village.

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### **Key words**

gender, injustice, deforestation, conflict, smallholder

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## Introduction

Gender inequality between women and men is closely related to notions of legitimacy and correctness. In family behavior, inequalities between women and men (and between girls and boys) are often accepted as natural or appropriate (Sen, 1985). Meanwhile, gender inequality as a result of a male bias can be commonly found within the development process, and may be seen as the end product of development (Branisa, Klasen, & Ziegler, 2013). In a matrilineal community of the Minangkabau people in Indonesia, however, the development brings no room for women to speak out and be heard.

The Minangkabau people, who live in West Sumatra Province, Indonesia, currently comprise the largest matrilineal society on earth (Metje, 1995). According to some anthropologists, their traditional social and political organization seemingly reflects a state of “pure matriliney” (Thomas & Benda-Beckmann, 1985). Within their matrilineal system, Minangkabau women occupy a distinctive place (Alim, 1994). The Minangkabau social structure is guided by *adat*, a behavioral code and worldview that sets the rules on matriliney in terms of village organization, group membership, residence, and the inheritance of property (Naim, 1979). *Adat* in the most general sense means “the way of life.” Sometimes translated by “customs,” *adat* comprises law, morals, customs, and conceptions (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2006, p.213). Among the Minangkabau, property such as *ulayat* land, *pusako tinggi* and *rumah gadang* (Minangkabau traditional house) are inherited through the female line (Hanani, 2013).

Minangkabau people categorize property into *pusako* and *ulayat*, *pusako* meaning inherited property such as agricultural land, and *ulayat* referring to communal property within a matrilineal unit. *Ulayat* land is reserved for members of a matrilineal social unit, and is intended for future agricultural expansion. Usually, a communal member has a right to access *ulayat* land, and the land is controlled by *Adat* functionaries as rights holders. *Ulayat* denotes village land or territory, and may be comprised of land, forest, water, and grazing land. *Ulayat* land is communal land owned jointly by its owners, and is distributed among the founding clans of the village, then administrated by the heads of these clans (Holleman, 1981). *Ulayat* land or communal land, as a *de facto* right, is defined as an interaction pattern built outside the realm of formal law, and includes *bakulayat*, a set of rules and

community regulations inherited from ancestors and enforced by the community (Larson, 2012). *Hakulayat* includes water, land, and air, and is commonly seen as equivalent to *tanahulayat*, since Minangkabau society perceives water, land, and air as inseparable elements (LBH Padang, 2005). There are three types of *Tanah ulayat*: (a) *ulayat Nagari* (Nagari or village communal land) that belongs to the community as a whole; (b) *ulayatsuku* (clan communal land) which consists of sub-clans and the size of which depends on the number of members; and (c) *ulayatkaum* (sub-clan communal land) (Warman, 2006).

According to Nasroen (1971), *ulayat* can only be owned as a collective and not personally. However, controlling and governing the *ulayat* land is undertaken by the headman or customary ruler (Narullah, 1999; LBH Padang, 2005). *Ulayat* is passed down through the generations, and the rights to its use pass to the women. The controller of rights over the communal land is the *mamakekepalawaris* (MKW) (Navis, 1986). A principal aspect of *ulayat* is that it cannot be traded, but can only be mortgaged under particular circumstances (Rajo-Panghulu, 1978).

In contrast to a patrilineal society, in which women have less rights and privilege over resources, resource management in the Minangkabau's matrilineal society is very different, as women have the right to inherit natural resources. So, from a gender issue perspective, is it possible for gender inequality to exist within the Minangkabau matrilineal system?

The men continue to have relatively greater authority within Minangkabau society, including with regard to regulating property rights, as the *adat* functions are managed by men. But their authority is limited only to managing the communal properties. Women's limited power regarding the management of *ulayat* creates a gender disparity<sup>1</sup> (Mikkola & Miles, 2007), though this does not reflect a particular case of gender inequality when managing natural resources, as is commonly the case in developing countries; in Minangkabau society, gender inequality refers to inequality in conditions among women and men for realizing their full human rights (Chaudhry & Rahman, 2009). Such inequality occurs in both matrilineal and patrilineal systems.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women defines discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex [...] in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field" (UN Women, 2003, part 1 article 1).

This deviation from the norm within the Minangkabau matrilineal system occurs in terms of managing natural resources such as the *ulayat* in Nagari Bonjol, specifically within Melayu Clan. The clan owns *ulayatsukeu*, incorporating 33,550 ha of *ulayat* forest (communal forest), the actual sized of *ulayat* forest within the Melayu clan is not really known as such, because it uses only natural boundaries (Mutolib, Yonariza, Mahdi, & Ismono, 2015). Ideally, the rights to access *ulayat* forest land should be possessed by all clan members, with its management based on Minangkabau customary rules. However, an inconsistency exists in the management of the *ulayat* forest of the Melayu clan, one that runs counter to the custom. The *ulayat* rulers sell forest land for their own personal interest in spite of the Minangkabau custom that forbids the selling of *ulayat* land.<sup>2</sup> This paper aims to answer the question: Is the *ulayat* forest management system used in Nagari Bonjol by the Melayu clan fair to women? Why does inequality towards women exist in the management of communal forest land within the Melayu clan of Nagari Bonjol? The study analyzes women's position and role in the management of *ulayat* as part of the Minangkabau's matrilineal system. This research would seem to be important due to the limited literature that exists on gender inequality among matrilineal societies. The presence of gender inequality within the study society will be demonstrated using three pieces of evidence: the process governing how *ulayat* forest is sold, the Nucleus Estate Small Holder Plantation (NESHP) plot distribution process, and the discrepancy in rights that exists between men and women in managing the *ulayat* forest.

## Methodology

### *Study Site*

This study employs a case study approach, with the research conducted in the Nagari Bonjol<sup>3</sup> sub-district of Koto Besar, Dharmasraya Regency,

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<sup>2</sup> Customary rulers consist of the Datuk Bandaro Kuniang and several Mamak Kepala Waris (MKW). All these positions are held by men. The MKW is the designated representative in terms of property affairs (the mother's brother, who is the head of the heirs) (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> *Nagari* is a traditional organization considered the smallest local government unit in the province of West Sumatra (Tegnan, 2015).

West Sumatra in Indonesia. Dharmasraya District is located 220 km to the east of Padang City, the provincial capital of West Sumatra. Dharmasraya District has an area of 3025.99 km<sup>2</sup> and is generally flat, with elevations ranging between 82 to 1,525 m above sea level (BPS Dharmasraya, 2014). Dharmasraya District has extensive oil palm and rubber plantations, the most in West Sumatra (BPS West Sumatra, 2016). Most of the land in the district—88.26% of the total land area—is used for agriculture; Dharmasraya also has some low land forest covering an area of 92,950 ha.

### *Data Collection Technique*

Data, both primary and secondary, were collected between January and April 2016. The secondary data were collected from relevant agencies such as Dhamrasyara Production Forest Management Unit (PFMU), Bureau of Statistics, and the Dharmasraya Forestry Service. Primary data, meanwhile, were collected using participant observation, key informant interviews, and a household survey. In all, 13 key informants were interviewed, and these included traditional leaders (*Ninikmamak*<sup>4</sup> and the *Datuak* customary authorities), Nagari leaders, and institutional leaders. In addition, a household survey was carried out, with samples taken using simple random sampling from the list of households in the village. A total number of 27 married women were sampled.

The research work also included anthropological observation, in which the researcher stayed within the community for four months, procuring more reliable, valid, and accurate information.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using descriptive–qualitative tools, with the research goal being to explain whether the *ulayat forest* system has ensured equality for women. Data analysis followed the approach described by Miles and Huberman using data reduction, data display, and conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

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<sup>4</sup> *Ninik Mamak* is a traditional institution that consists of several *penghulu* who come from different clans in Minangkabau.

## Study Area

Nagari Bonjol covers an area of 268.83 km<sup>2</sup> (more or less 10% of Dharmasraya district). According to the Indonesian government, there are 33,000 ha of remaining production forest located in Nagari Bonjol. This constitutes state forest, in which the government has exercised various forest management models. In 1972, the management of this forest was placed under a forest concessioner who was able to exploit 66,000 ha of production forest. During this forest concession period, the Bonjol community had no access to forest resources. Then, in 2002 the government terminated the forest concession, and the forest area, dominated by secondary forest, was divided into two parts: permanent production forest and oil palm plantations. Use permits were issued to three oil palm plantation companies, as well as to Nucleus Estate Smallholder Oil Palm Plantation (NESHP). Meanwhile, the remaining forest was then also divided into two management systems: industrial plantation forest (HTI) and Dipterocarpaceae Enrichment Management (Meranti Development Model, MDM). The HTI was granted to a private company while MDM was granted to a state forest company (Inhutani). During this forest management transition, the Nagari Bonjol matrilineal community, and especially the Melayu Clan, regained control over the forest land, as their *ulayat* land, so the companies had to gain permission from the *adat* functionaries if they wished to access the forest land. Meanwhile, although use permits were granted to two forestry companies, the remaining forest was encroached upon by locals with the permission of the *adat* functionaries. Access to *ulayat* land by non-community members through land transactions was then facilitated by *adat* functionaries as the rights holders. By 2014 there was only 20% of secondary forest left which was degraded. As a result, the government introduced a new forest management model called Forest Management Unit (FMU) within the production forest. Unfortunately, the FMU has to deal with locals to access the forest, since most of the forest land is occupied *ulayat*.

Following the Minangkabau's matrilineal system, each nagari has to have at least four clans to facilitate clan exogamy. Nagari Bonjol has five clans: (a) Melayu; (b) Piliang; (c) Patopang; (d) Chaniago; and (e) Talao. Traditionally, Nagari Bonjol was part of Nagari Abai Siat, but as part of administrative reforms in 1979, Nagari Abai Siat was split into several *desas*—a Javanese model of village administration—one of which was *Desa*

Bonjol. However, in 2000 the Desa administration was abolished when the central government adopted a decentralization policy. In West Sumatra Province, such decentralization was seen as a way to revitalize the Nagari administrative system. In the case of Desa Bonjol, the community was not returned to be a part of Nagari Abai Siat, but instead emerged as a new Nagari. All Melayu clan *ulayat* were integrated into territory inside the new Nagari Bonjol. As part of the revitalization of the Nagari administration, therefore, Nagari Bonjol emerged as new Nagari, and this coincided with a vacuum developing in terms of forest management. This situation led to a new form of control being introduced over the *ulayat* forest land.

Since 2000, the Melayu clan has continued to clear *ulayat* land, for as mentioned earlier, a forest management vacuum has led to such land clearing. *Adat* functionaries have also given access to non-clan or non-Nagari members, and especially influential individuals. Hence, there has been collaboration between *adat* functionaries and public figures, the aim being to legitimate access to such forest land, which is still considered state forest. Giving access to non-members is actually not a Minangkabau custom, as access to *ulayat* is meant to be exclusive to clan or nagari members. Selling *ulayat* land to non-members has also been triggered by the relatively large amount of land available when compared to the local population, as there are only 572 households to access 33,000 ha of *ulayat* forest. This study intends to describe the gender inequality that exists within the *ulayat* land sale process.

## Results

### *Lineages and Power in Minangkabau*

Minangkabau society follows matrilineal system in which the transgenerational link is through the maternal line. This means that ancestral land and matrilineal title passes from the grandmother to the mother, and then on to the granddaughter and her descendants in the female line (Sanday, 2002). Under this matrilineal system, women are positioned at the core of the generational family. Largely through this matrilineal social organization, the leading figure in a Minangkabau extended family, usually the oldest sister, is a symbolic “queen mother” or *Bundo Kanduang* (Sanday, 2002). The responsibility of the *Bundo Kanduang* is to teach other extended family mem-

bers about customs and the *adat* (Sanday, 2002). Her role also includes serving as an important advisor to relatives and kinsfolk.

Among Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol, however, power remains in the hands of the males, acting as *adat* functionaries. Clan leadership is male dominated, a patriarchal system commonly found in Asia where gender stereotypes are prevalent, that is, where women are seen as less capable than men on matters pertaining to the public sphere, and women's position within the family as a whole remains weak (Lee, 2003; Kowtha, 2013), meaning they are lower in the power hierarchy (Lee, 2003).

### *Adat and Property in Minangkabau*

*Adat* is an important element in local ideology among the Minangkabau, and that although it is constantly in use, remains highly ambiguous (Khan, 1980). *Adat* is usually translated by anthropologists as “customary law.” In its most general form of reference, however, *adat* can mean simply “the way,” as in “the way we as Minangkabau do things.” The term, therefore, is remarkably close to such anthropological concepts as culture. More often, when *adat* is discussed, the speaker is drawing attention to something he or she believes is unique to Minangkabau society, and in particular to something related to codes of conduct, inheritance, and those aspects of the management of property associated with the matrilineal kinship system. In this sense, *adat* could be translated loosely as “tradition.” That is, a single aspect of the current culture thought to be derived from the past, and hence set aside from other cultural aspects, could be cited as *adat*. Among the Minangkabau's traditional sayings (*papatab*), *adat* is sometimes said to encompass *syar'a* or Islamic religious law (Khan, 1980). While all societies are thought to have their own forms of *adat*, Minangkabau *adat* is said to be special because it is based on the matrilineal principles set into the clans and lineages, known as *kaum* (Kahn, 1980). Regarding the Minangkabau group, Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann (2006) have argued that how it treats property is “[...] very interesting because it has two rather distinct forms of communal property” (p. 195). One is inherited property based on matrilineages (*pusakao*), and this is comprised of both immaterial and material goods, notably irrigated rice fields. The other form is *ulayat* or village commons—the part of a village's territory that is not used for sedentary agriculture and that fall under the control of the village council



or the heads of the villages matrilineans. Both property forms have become embedded in different ways within the plural legal system and subject to different struggles between villagers, state agencies, and proponents of Islam (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2006).

Much of the work about Minangkabau matriliney and *adat* focus on heartland of Minangkabau (*darek*) where subsistence economy is supported by irrigated rice fields. In this setting, Blackwood (2000) stated that “families and lineages are oriented around the mother and her daughters and sons; rice farming and life-cycle ceremonies are organized by and through women and their brother”(p.1). This form of matriliney empowers women as controllers of land and houses, creating an obvious dissonance with the masculinist discourses of the state, Islam, and capitalism. In this setting property relation has developed into inherited property *haratopusako* (see Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2006, for detail). In the *rantau* area of Minangkabau, i.e., in Nagari Bonjol, dryland rice was the main crop using a shifting cultivation system. This system was practiced in *ulayat* land. When the world economy entered the Nagari during Dutch colonial time and intensified in the late 1980s, rubber, a market-oriented commodity, was planted, replacing dry land rice. The role of clan leader is central in issuing permits pertaining to which part of the forest land can be cleared for rubber cultivation.

As we found within the Melayu Clan in Nagari Bonjol, the concept of *ulayat* is a bit different. With the *ulayat* of the Melayu clan, access can be granted to Nagari members from outside the Melayu clan. This happens particularly when population densities are very low. For members of the Melayu clan, both male and female, if access to the land in the forest is granted, they can clear forest land according to their wishes. However, over the last two decades the role of the *adat* leaders has become more important with regard to forest land clearance activities. Because authority over such activities resides in the hands of the *adat* functionaries, their actions have gradually diverged from the clan’s usual customs.

Ribot and Peluso (2003) stated that “property rights is a bundle of rights that transforms into a “bundle of powers” regarding access, and advocated for locating these powers within the social and political-economic contexts that shape people’s abilities to benefit from resources”(p. 153). They used certain categories to illustrate the kinds of power relations that can affect rights-based access mechanisms; these are accessibility to technology, capi-

tal, markets, labor, knowledge, authority, identity, and social relations. As has happened in our case, the holders of power make an effort to control access and ownership over natural resources to maintain their power and benefit from the natural resources. The power holders, exclusively male, fully control access to *ulayat* land for their own benefit. As they have full control over *ulayat* land, they grant access to non-members by way of land transactions, sometimes to the private sector, without consulting clan members or Nagari members in advance, as they are supposed to do. This represents a deviation from the clan's *ulayat* land rules (Afrizal, 2007).

### *Women of the Melayu Clan in Ulayat Forest Management*

Literature on the Minangkabau agrees that the rights holder *ulayat* land is the *Mamak Kepala Warisor MKW* (Navis, 1986). As mentioned earlier, *ulayat* forest in Nagari Bonjol falls under the control of the Melayu clan. It is unclear what the actual size of the *ulayat* forest is, but it is estimated to be more than 33,000 ha (Mutolib et al., 2015). Even though the forest is owned by all the clan's members, it is managed by a *Datnak* called DBK (acronym for anonymous), the *ulayat* ruler. Besides DBK, the *ulayat* forest is also managed by several MKWs. In the hands of *Datnak* the *ulayat* ruler and MKW, the forest is maintained in accordance with the Melayu clan's needs. The MKW obligation is to manage the *ulayat* forest for the welfare of all its members. In this case it is already very clear that women in the Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol have equal rights with men to acquire, manage, and control the forests for the needs of her life with the approval of the MKW.

After *ulayat* forest is opened into plantation or agriculture land, the status is changed from *ulayat* to *haratopusako* and inherited for the next generation through maternal lineage. The authority of MKW is only as a forest Manager of *ulayat* forest, not as the owner. *Ulayat* forest is communally owned by all members of the Melayu clan. According to customary rules, the clan's *ulayat* land should be treated as the clan's asset as a whole, and so should be used for the benefit of all clan members. Therefore, a member who wants to farm inside the forest is permitted to clear the forest, and the size of land to be cleared depends on the permission granted by the communal ruler (Mutolib et al., 2015).

Even though this land is passed on and women are entitled to use it,

only men have full authority over management of the communal forest. In reality, women in the Melayu clan do not have the right to manage it. Such a weak position for the women represents an unequal practice in terms of forest land management. This unequal practice is maintained in order to benefit the men. The practice of *ulayat* forest management as communal property in Melayu clan is not conducted according to Minangkabau concept; it is conducted to the detriment of women. However, this is not an isolated case, as the same also happens in other parts of the world, such in Gujarat, India, where gender inequality exists in terms of water access rights, favoring the males (Upadhyay, 2004).

### *Management of the Ulayat Forest: Has It Always Treated Women Unfairly?*

During the forest concessionaire era, *ulayat* rights holders did not engage in forest management activities, as the regime in place at that time gave little or no room for the community to manage the forest, even though the forest was claimed by the community as their own. In concept and in practice, there should be no gender inequality when accessing the *ulayat* forest land; the land may be used by the community for agriculture, so as to accommodate population growth. However, things changed when the community regained control over the forest land, with greater regional autonomy introduced and with the return of the Nagari government system. At this time, gender inequality emerged within the Melayu's management of the *ulayat* forest, as rights holders began to deviate from Minangkabau customs. Two pieces of evidences exist to prove this inequality: *Ulayat* forest land transactions made with non-members, and manipulation of the NESHP plot distribution process. As will be shown in more detail later, these two deviations from common practice have led to women losing their rights over *ulayat* land, and they are now not consulted when the land is sold. Again, this is not an isolated case, as studies elsewhere have shown how women sometimes experience inequality and injustice when it comes to natural resource management (e.g., Upadhyay, 2004; Samma & Johnson-Ross, 2007).

### *Selling Ulayat Forest Land*

Under Minangkabau customs, *ulayat* forest land is communally owned.

Therefore, it is forbidden from being sold. However, much of this land in the study area has recently been sold by the Melayu clan leaders. It is difficult to pinpoint a specific reason for this, but in earlier times the land was sold at a low price to high-ranking military personnel and government officials. It is also clear the *ulayat* rights holders had close links with these influential figures, facilitating the land sales. Unfortunately, the proceeds from the sale of this land were retained by the rights holders for their own benefit. The women, on the other hand, with no rights to manage the forest land, are not involved in making decisions related to the fate of the forest land, and in fact only three men have this authority, but the sales process itself involves two others figures at the *nagari* level. Table 1 shows that only the men hold the power and authority to manage the *ulayat* forest.

**Table 1.**  
*Parties Involved in the Sale of Ulayat Forest Land*

Position	Authority	Gender
Ulayat land rightsholder (DBK)	To sell the <i>ulayat</i> forest	Male
Head of the lineages or MKW	To sell the <i>ulayat</i> forest	Male
Head of the Nagari Council	Proof of sale for <i>ulayat</i> forest	Male
Wali Nagari (Nagari leader)	Purchase <i>ulayat</i> forest	Male

*Source:* In-depth interviews.

The price of land varies according to its position in the forest and the slope (Mutolib et al., 2015), but a price that is considered cheap ranges between IDR 2,500,000 and 10,000,000 per hectare (USD 200 to USD 800).<sup>5</sup> The size of the land sold varies between 20 and 500 ha (Mutolib et al., 2015). At such a cheap price, this forest land has become an attractive proposition for outsiders. The buyers come from various professions and backgrounds outside the Dharmasraya District. There is no limit on how much land can be bought; all buyers are allowed to buy different sizes, though in Indonesia or in the case of the Dharmasraya, it is only public figures who can buy large pieces of land. One key informant, who happens to be an MKW, described some of those who have bought *ulayat* forest land from him, as shown in Table 2.

<sup>5</sup> USD 1 equals IDR 13,186 (Central Bank of Indonesia, as of August 24, 2016)

Table 2.  
*Ulayat Forest Bought by Officials and Outsiders*

Buyer's Position (assigned by author)	Size of Land	Buyer's Origin
Army pensioner 1	140 ha	Neither clan nor Nagari
Army pensioner 2	150 ha	Neither clan nor Nagari
Army pensioner 3	50 ha	Neither clan nor Nagari
Policeman 1	100 ha	Neither clan nor Nagari
Policeman 2	50 ha	Neither clan nor Nagari
Official 1	>500 ha	Neither clan nor Nagari
Official 2	>50 ha	Neither clan nor Nagari

*Source:* Key informant interviews.

### *Manipulation of NESHP Plot Distribution*

As mentioned earlier, a few years after the logging concessions ceased, the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry (MoF) converted half the production forest into oil palm plantations, for which the Nucleus Estate Small Holder Oil Palm Plantation (NESHP) development model was adopted.<sup>6</sup> A private company was appointed as a nucleus estate by the government, while smallholdings were meant to be distributed among Nagari members. The clan was represented by the *ulayat* ruler, MKW and *Nimik Mamak*, and several men agreed to release their forest land to the private oil palm company. In turn, they demanded that the corporation give 500 families in Nagari Bonjo 11,000 ha of small holding oil palm plantation plots so they could work the land as smallholders. As part of the plan, every household was to get a 2 ha plot of smallholding. The aim of this agreement was to compensate local people for the transfer of *ulayat* land to a private company. It was also expected that the NESHP would improve the economic position of the clan's members.

Unfortunately, after the palm plantations had been developed by the oil palm company, the *ulayat* ruler and signatories to the agreement (only the men involved) did not distribute the smallholder oil palm plantation plots

<sup>6</sup> The smallholder oil palm plantation scheme is a company-led project designed to assist smallholders in becoming independent plantation growers. This scheme was conceived as part of an empowerment program, the aim being to improve the economic position of communities close to the company.

fairly to Nagari members. They shared the land only with prominent men in the area, Nagari and their close relatives. This represents a clear evidence of an abuse of power and created an unequal situation. Such injustice was rooted in the lack of women's involvement during the signing of the MoU between the *adat* rulers and the company: in other words, it was solely a men's affair. The men took advantage of this situation to manipulate the distribution of the NESHP plots, by assigning their own close family and friends as recipients of the smallholding plantation plots. Also, they did not register all members of the Nagari Bonjol community, who mainly belonged to the Melayu clan. Many of the men who did receive land gave it to their wives, children, and relatives to conceal their misdeed. Moreover, many of these plots were given to Melayu men living outside Nagari Bonjol.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Melayu Women: When Matters Are More Precious Than Kinship*

The selling of *ulayat* forest land and the manipulation of the NESHP plot distribution process disadvantages women, as they lose the chance to inherit their *ulayat* land following the female line. However, there has been little or no resistance from the women regarding this issue. While we were at the research site, a lot of women refused to speak to us about how exactly the *ulayat* forest is managed and whether they feel the management is fair or not. Talking about sales of *ulayat* forest land and the distribution of oil palm plantation plots is also taboo for the women; they were afraid to talk about it even though what the Melayu clan men were doing was wrong according to the tradition.

We also heard an interesting story from a group of Melayu women about their suffering due to *ulayat* land sales and the unfair NESHP plot distribution process. The group consisted of five women 50 to over 100 years of old. They belong to Melayu clan who live in an ancestral house called *arumahgadang*.<sup>8</sup> They recounted to us the difficulties they experience as Melayu women due to the actions of male Melayu clan *adat* functionaries. The story is related to the manipulation of the NESHP plot distribution

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<sup>7</sup> The Minangkabau matrilineal system follows matrilocal, in which a man moves to stay with his wife after getting married.

<sup>8</sup> *RumabGadang* or communal house is a matrilineal house in Minangkabau society.

process, as illustrated below:

We (the Melayu clan) do have an enormous amount of *ulayat* forest land, but we (women) do not have any rights to manage the land. We may open-up the forest for farming, but we do not have money for gardening. They (the Melayu men) are indeed our brothers, but they have deceived us. Mr. A (a Melayu man) is my nephew, a son of my relatives, but even he deceived us. We were supposed to get a 2ha plot per family, and if we had received the oil palm plantation land we would now have between 1 and 2 million in income monthly. But, the land was not shared equally and is now being controlled by Mr. A and his family (his wife's family). Mr. A lives in his wife's Nagari other than Bonjol, but he is an adat functionary of the Melayu clan who has authority over managing the *ulayat* forest, including negotiating the sale of the land to other parties such as the oil palm companies, and in distributing the NESHP plots. Despite this, Mr. A still visits us at our rumahgadangan on a regular basis. Even though he has deceived us (the female members of the Melayu clan), Mr. A does not hesitate to meet us. For him, looking after his own family is more important than looking after his matrilineal extended family. We are bonded as one clan family, but these days money related matters are more important than kinship bonds and family.

These comments reveal that actually women are angry about the sale of *ulayat* land, but that they have no power to influence it. In this case, it was the woman's brother who sold the land. There is also no forum at which they can speak out, for they rely totally on their male kin to manage socio-cultural and economic affairs of the matrilineal social unit, such as weddings, funerals and house construction activities, as well as to represent the clan in public.

#### *Why are Melayu Women Oppressed?*

Gender inequality is not perpetuated exclusively through differential access to and control over material resources. Gender norms and stereotypes reinforce gendered identities and constrain the behaviour of women and

men in ways that can lead to inequality (Ridgeway, 2011; UNDP, 2015). As we found out in our study area, gender inequalities have led to a very low level of education among the women of Nagari Bonjol, and the issue of gender equality is considered taboo. Why then are the women being oppressed? There are at least three possible reasons for this: the weak position of women in society, their low level of education, and the perception that speaking out about gender inequality is a taboo subject.

### *Weak Position of Women in Society*

In a patrilineal kinship structure, people descended from the father's side are given priority, meaning people trace their origins through their male ancestors (Haviland, 1990). In such a situation, succession and inheritance are handed down from the senior male of one generation to the senior male of the next within the kinship group (Vubo, 2005). In a matrilineal kinship system, meanwhile, descent and inheritance are carried out through the female line (Holden, Sear, & Mace, 2003; Mattison, 2011). This means there are certain kinship groups that follow the mother's family line. In such an arrangement, a woman's brother is responsible for her children, rather than her husband (Stark, 2013). Among the Minangkabau, power resides with the men (patriarchy), and men dominate socio-economic and political affairs, including the rights to natural resource ownership and management (Upadhyay, 2004), as has happened within the Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol.

The Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol follows a matrilineal system, but the women's position is still considered less important within the society (Alim, 1994). Within the group's members' social lives, anything related to customs, communal management, Nagari government, and marriages is fully controlled by men. The problem is that frequently the decisions made by the male rulers in managing the *ulayat* land only benefit the men, and disadvantage the women. Such a weak position among the women has eventually led the men to act in their own personal interests, without considering the rest of the clan's members. It is not yet clear why men sell land to outsiders, and whether they are concerned about selling land access to non-members, against their own customs. Nevertheless, their acts deviate from wider Minangkabau society's common customs. It is also not clear why the women accept these actions. As a result, we will try to answer



these questions by reviewing the social status of women within the Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol, such as by looking at their level of education.

### *Low Level of Education*

One of the key factors leading to inequality between men and women is education level (Otto, 2010; Goldblatt & Freedman, 2015). Klasen (2002) reported that a low level of education among women has a negative economic impact. The more educated women are, the more they are exposed to gender-equal ideas and environments, and the educational process itself implicitly influences women to become more exposed to gender equality concepts (Lee, 2003; Ahn, 2011). The Nagari Bonjol community considers education to be unimportant, though a few finish junior and senior school. Our snapshot survey revealed the level of education among women in Nagari Bonjol, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
*Women's Education Level in Nagari Bonjol*

Education level	N	Percentage
Did not complete elementary school	20	93
Completed elementary school	7	7
Completed junior high school	0	0
Completed senior high school	0	0
Total	27	100

*Source:* Household survey.

Table 3 shows how low the level of women's education in Nagari Bonjol is much lower than in rural areas in Indonesia in general. Most women do not finish elementary school and rarely attend junior or senior high school. This low level of education discourages Melayu women from fighting against the sale of *ulayat* forest, and facilitates the manipulation of the NESHP plot distribution process by the male *ulayat* rulers. Even though the women are disadvantaged by these activities, they keep any grievances to themselves, and have insufficient knowledge or courage to take on the rulers.

In addition to the low level of the women's education, Nagari Bonjol society also follows a culture of early marriage. Knowles, Lorgelly, and Owen

(2002) stated that women's education level affects marriage ages and birth rates. The low level of education means that men in Nagari Bonjol get married between 18 and 20, while the women get married at an even earlier age, around 18 years old. Also, marriage in Nagari Bonjol is still dominated by marriage to partners from the same Nagari. Often, marriage is within hamlet as long as they do not belong to the same clan, as the Minangkabau ethnic group has adopted a clan exogamy system. The low level of education and marriage at a young age results in higher levels of poverty and a lack of development. This means the community can only rely on its land to sustain livelihoods. For the women, the low level of education and early marriages create a vicious circle in which they are moving further and further away from gender equality. This happens because the society still relies on natural resources that are fully controlled by the men.

### *Gender Equality is Considered a "Taboo" Subject*

Despite their special status within the matrilineal system, women do not occupy an influential position in society, including having a say in managing *ulayat* land. Also, the interactions between men and women within Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol represent culturally ingrained habits that have created gender inequality (Jayachandran, 2015). These habits mean that it is taboo for women to disagree with the male customary leaders. This cultural and habitual gender inequality within the Melayu clan has limited women's ability to fight against and prevent injustice in the management of the *ulayat* forest by men who hold a higher position in society. In many cases, women experience gender inequality in their social lives in terms of access to resources, job opportunities, and education, and also when women behave outside traditional stereotypical norms and enter male-dominated professions such as policing. Such women tend to demand better access to resources, plus have a higher level of education, and so receive a negative response from others within the clan, which further limits them (Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Guo & Liang, 2012). The social exclusion women experience as a result of all these factors deprives them of information and learning, and also leads to gender inequality (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Prokos & Padavic, 2002).

## Discussion

In practice, the management of *ulayat* forest by the Melayu clan in Dharmasraya deviates from its own customary rules, and also differs from the rules followed by the Minangkabau group in general. This deviation is apparent in the way the forest is managed by the Melayu clan's leaders. Such a deviation, however, should not be used as a reference point; to generalize about the management of *ulayat* land among the Minangkabau as a whole, since there are plenty of Minangkabau people who manage *ulayat* land according to the customary rules (Rochmayanto, Sasmita, & Jannetta, 2004; Gadis, 2011). Furthermore, the oppression of women during the management of *ulayat* forest under Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol, Dharmasraya should also not be used to generalize women's position in Minangkabau society. Normally, women in Minangkabau society have quite a prominent position, as proved by the use of the term *Bundo Kanduang*, which makes the position and opinion of Minangkabau women highly valued in their society. Women in the Melayu clan in Nagari Bonjol, Dharmasraya face a different situation when compared to other Minangkabau women, whose status is highly respected by the men. As a result, it is of great interest to study the discrimination and oppression experienced by women in the Melayu clan, as it will enrich the existing research, most of which is focused on patrilineal systems as a cause of gender inequality in society.

Within the Melayu clan of Minangkabau in Dharmasraya, the abuse of authority by men in the management of the *ulayat* forest reflects a lack of readiness to face-up to their changing circumstances on the part of the local people, moving as they are from a subsistence based society to a more commercially oriented one. The outcomes are an alteration of the society's viewpoint and mindset, and also the eclipsing of Minangkabau customs on how the clan should manage the *ulayat* forest. What happens now is that the communal rulers place economics as the highest priority, so prioritizing profit maximization over the customary rules and selling the *ulayat* forest, which is their responsibility. The Melayu clan has the good fortune to be in control of a forest covering 33,550 ha; an enormous *ulayat* forest. With less than 500 householders living in this area, it is very unlikely that any family within the clan will face a land shortage when it comes to farming and gardening. In spite of this, the selling of *ulayat* forest has depleted the

amount of land owned by the clan.

The management of *ulayat* forest owned by the Melayu clan has also been heavily affected by the development of the forestry sector as a whole and the opening of plantations around the *ulayat* forest. The development of the local forest was initiated by West Sumatra Smallholder Development Projects (WSSDP), which was set-up by the government in 1980, followed by the entry of a private oil palm plantation in the early 2000s (Syarfi, 2006). These programs indirectly alerted the local people to the fact that their *ulayat* forest was a valuable asset, causing communal rulers to forget the forest's main function. This means that when they regained control over their forest land, they started to sell it for their own benefit, without taking into account the clan's common interests. Sales of this land began in the early 2000 and have continued ever since, severely depleting the *ulayat* forest. It is currently estimated that only around 1,000 ha of secondary forest remains. One negative impact of the development of the forestry and farming sectors has been the local women's loss of control over their own land and a loss of status when it comes to managing land within the matrilineal system (Dey, 2008).

The selling of *ulayat* by the rulers has ruined any chance of future Melayu clan generations enjoying the forest, and in fact has simply helped enriched other clans. But in the end, it will be the Melayu clan women and future generations of Melayu clan who suffer the most from the depletion of the Melayu clan's *ulayat* forest.

The presence of inequality and the oppression of women in the Melayu clan (part of the Minangkabau matrilineal society), runs counter to previous research that claimed gender inequality is mainly a problem of patrilocality<sup>9</sup> and patrilineality (Jayachandran, 2015). It's true that patrilocality creates a gap between men and women which finally results in gender inequality (Oster, 2009; Jayachandran, 2015), while in a patrilineal culture, control over resources frequently follows the father's lineage, often disadvantaging women. However, the gender inequality that exists between men and women in the Melayu clan of Minangkabau proves that such inequality can also

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<sup>9</sup> When a woman gets married, she essentially ceases to be a member of her birth family and joins her husband's family. Under this system, parents potentially reap more of the returns to investments in a son's health and education because he will remain a part of their family, whereas a daughter will physically and financially leave her parents upon marriage.

occur in matrilineal societies, not only in patrilineal ones.

### Conclusion

The existence of the *ulayat* forest within Minangkabau matrilineal society does not guarantee equality for the local women in terms of access to and use of the forest, a situation caused by women's lack of management authority. Such a lack of authority has resulted in *ulayat* forest land being sold-off by the men in charge. Moreover, inequality towards women is also apparent in the palm oil plantation units distribution, when the influential men manipulated the process to benefit themselves. This oppression of Melayu clan women is caused by their fragile social status in the customary structure, their low level of education, and the fact that the women of the Melayu clan consider gender equality a taboo issue that is never discussed. These three factors give rise to the misuse of authority by those men who manage the *ulayat* forest; whose sole aim is to enrich themselves. The fragile social status of women within Melayu clan and their low level of education render them incapable of fighting against the unjust treatment they receive from those men who arbitrarily manage the *ulayat* forest.

The most interesting conclusion to be derived from this research is associated with equality and women's position within the Melayu's clan matrilineal system in Nagari Bonjol, for despite the system being matrilineal in nature, women tend to be treated unfairly and suffer from gender inequality. This shows that gender based disparity and inequality towards women can occur anywhere, even within a matrilineal system.

### Recommendations

The Melayu clan's customary norms should be reintroduced and reinforced, to guarantee women's position among Melayu clan community or Nagari Bonjol at large and restrict men's rights over the *ulayat* forest. The second of these could be introduced by creating a set of local regulations that forbid the sale of *ulayat* land. This is important, since the local institutions that are responsible for managing the *ulayat* forest tend to be abused by those in power. Moreover, it is important for a gender awareness campaign to be run to help promote the rights of women and gender equality in matters related to the *ulayat* within Melayu clan society. Once

women of Melayu clan understand their rights and obligations in relation to the *ulayat*, they are more likely to regain some form of control over the men currently in charge. Such an approach may also help limit the men's authority and preserve the communal forest land for future generations.

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