

Indigenous Papuan Women Under Patriarchal Socio-Political Systems: Marginalization In International Relations And Indigenous Peoples Politics

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ABSTRACT

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Issues concerning Indigenous women have gained increasing attention in global discussions on human rights and Indigenous Peoples. However, a significant gap persists in International Relations scholarship, particularly within Feminist International Relations, which has not systematically examined the lived experiences of Indigenous Papuan women within global Indigenous rights discourse. This study analyzes the forms of marginalization faced by Indigenous Papuan women in patriarchal social structures and explores how these experiences intersect with international Indigenous governance frameworks. Using a qualitative descriptive case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of academic and policy documents. The analysis draws on patriarchy theory, Feminist International Relations, and Indigenous rights frameworks. Findings show that Indigenous Papuan women experience multi-layered marginalization rooted in entrenched local patriarchal norms and reinforced by limited representation in global governance arenas. This is reflected in restricted decision-making power, limited access to land and economic resources, inadequate education and healthcare, and minimal formal leadership roles. Despite these constraints, they demonstrate resilience through community-based economic initiatives, land and environmental advocacy, legal literacy programs, and grassroots diplomacy. Theoretically, this study advances Feminist International Relations by positioning Indigenous women's local experiences as constitutive of global politics and exposing how global governance reproduces intersectional marginalization.



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INTRODUCTION

The issue of indigenous women has increasingly gained attention in global discourse on human rights and indigenous peoples within the field of International Relations. In contemporary developments, indigenous communities are understood as groups vulnerable to marginalization due to development processes, the exploitation of natural resources, and the weak recognition of their collective rights at both national and global levels (Issues, 2025). However, attention to indigenous peoples in international discourse remains largely general in nature and has not yet fully incorporated the specific experiences of indigenous women as a group facing multiple and intersecting forms of inequality.

Papuan indigenous women occupy a highly vulnerable position as they face multiple layers of marginalization. In addition to being marginalized as part of indigenous communities within their relations with the state and the global market, Papuan indigenous women also live within patriarchal social systems that restrict their roles, voices, and access within customary structures, local politics, and socio-economic life (Worry Mambusy Manoby, 2023). This patriarchal system reproduces power relations that place indigenous women in subordinate positions, both in the domestic and public spheres, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities that persist across generations (Emily Grafton, 2025).

These structural injustices are reflected in various concrete cases experienced by Papuan indigenous women (Urbaningrum, 2022). In the context of natural resource management and development, indigenous women are often excluded from consultation processes and decision-making related to customary land, despite their crucial roles in environmental stewardship and in meeting the needs of their communities (Sa'diah, 2025). In addition, Papuan indigenous women face limited access to formal leadership positions and public institutions, as well as minimal representation within customary mechanisms and local governance (Titia Erika Sarlota Awom, 2025). Reports by civil society organizations indicate that Papuan indigenous women remain vulnerable to gender-based violence, criminalization, and discrimination within legal systems and development policies that lack gender sensitivity (Perempuan, 2024); (Nusantara, 2024). receive, which further deepens gender inequality in Papua (Kristien Maryen Cenderawasih, 2025).

In the global context, various contemporary international norms and regimes emphasize the importance of protecting indigenous women through gender equality and inclusive development agendas (Satria Unggul Wicaksana Prakasa, 2023). However, the gap between global normative commitments and local realities continues to persist, especially when international norms confront entrenched patriarchal social systems and power relations at the local level (Laksana Arum Nugraheni, 2022). This highlights the limitations of the effectiveness of global norms in addressing the concrete experiences of indigenous women on the ground.

In International Relations studies, research on indigenous peoples and gender remains relatively limited and is often marginalized by state-centric approaches. Critical perspectives, such as Feminist International Relations and critical indigenous studies, emphasize that the experiences of indigenous women are an important part of global power dynamics, including in the formation of international norms, human rights discourse, and global governance (Darwin Mezhak Loduwik Rumpumbo, 2025). The existing studies tend to focus either on (1) indigenous rights at the structural or normative level without gender-specific analysis, or (2) gender inequality at the local level without situating it within broader global governance and International Relations frameworks. There remains no systematic analysis that bridges the lived experiences of Papuan indigenous women, local patriarchal power structures, and contemporary global normative regimes within a coherent Feminist International Relations framework. This constitutes a significant theoretical and empirical gap in the literature.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to analyze the marginalization and inequalities experienced by Papuan indigenous women within patriarchal social systems by situating them within the discourse on indigenous peoples in International Relations. By doing so, this research not only addresses the identified gap but also contributes to the development of Feminist International Relations by integrating indigenous women's lived experiences into the analysis of global political processes and normative structures.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method to understand the experiences of Papuan indigenous women in facing marginalization and inequality under patriarchal social systems, as well as their relation to the discourse on indigenous peoples in International Relations studies. A qualitative approach is chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the complex social, cultural, and political nuances, while the case study method helps highlight local dynamics alongside their implications for global norms and practices (Elva, 2025); Malahati, Ultavia, Jannati, Qathrunnada, & Shaleh, 2023). The analysis of this study is framed through patriarchy and gender theories to explain the structural inequalities experienced by indigenous women, as well as through the perspective of Feminist International Relations to situate their experiences within the context of global power relations (Pacciardi, 2025). In addition, this study employs the framework of indigenous peoples' rights to evaluate the gap between normative recognition at the international level and the local realities faced by Papuan indigenous women (Batubara, 2024).

The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with Papuan indigenous women, indigenous community leaders, and women activists, as well as through participatory observation within indigenous communities. Secondary data were obtained from academic literature, reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations, and legal documents and international human rights instruments. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, aiming to identify key patterns and themes related to marginalization, structural inequality, and indigenous women's advocacy. These findings were then linked to patriarchy theory, the Feminist IR perspective, and the framework of indigenous peoples' rights to explain the relationship between local experiences and global norms.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation within indigenous communities. A total of 15 informants participated in this study, consisting of Papuan indigenous women, customary leaders, and women activists. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct experiences with indigenous governance, land issues, community leadership, or women's advocacy. This technique ensured that participants possessed relevant knowledge and lived experience related to the research focus. The research was conducted in selected indigenous communities in Papua Province, Southwest Papua Province and West Papua Province, chosen due to their active engagement in land rights advocacy and women-led community initiatives. Secondary data were obtained from academic literature, governmental and non-governmental reports, and legal documents as well as international human rights instruments. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to marginalization, structural inequality, and indigenous women's advocacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Marginalization of Papuan Indigenous Women within Patriarchal Structures

The marginalization of Papuan indigenous women within patriarchal structures is a strong and deeply entrenched phenomenon in many indigenous communities in Papua (Sa'adah, 2021). Women are often systematically excluded from decision-making spaces, control over resources, and public dialogues that shape the future of their own communities (Worry Mambusy Manoby M. S., 2023). Traditional patriarchy, which positions men as customary leaders, tribal chiefs, and primary decision-makers both informally and formally, often results in women's voices being regarded as unimportant or ignored in strategic forums (Anisya Dea Selly, 2023). In some indigenous communities in Papua, women are not even involved in customary meetings that discuss important matters such as natural resource management or traditional policies, even though they possess critical local knowledge essential for environmental sustainability and family well-being. The patriarchal value system in indigenous communities often positions men as the primary holders of authority in public spaces and customary decision-making, while women are confined to the domestic sphere (Worry Mambusy Manoby M. S., 2023). Research in the Dani community in the Baliem Valley shows that women are expected to remain in subordinate positions to men, taking on domestic roles such as tending gardens, managing households, and caring for children, while men dominate customary events and public activities. This results in gender injustice and various forms of violence against women (Catherine Flynn, 2023). Gender inequality in Papua remains relatively high, according to the 2024 Gender Inequality Index, which shows that Papua has a high level of gender disparity, reflecting differences between men and women across various social, economic, and political aspects of life (BPS, 2025).

Research findings indicate that Papuan indigenous women experience multiple layers of marginalization, particularly within patriarchal customary structures that emphasize male dominance (Satria Unggul Wicaksana Prakasa A. S., 2023). In many indigenous communities, such as the Dani and Moi tribes, important decisions within the family and customary affairs are usually made by men, while women serve as executors of domestic traditions and secondary rituals (Nurinaya, 2025). In the practice of managing customary land, only men have the formal rights to inherit and sell indigenous land, while women are allowed to use the land solely for domestic purposes (Kendi, 2022). This limits women's access to important economic resources and positions them as subordinate actors within the social structure.

From the perspective of patriarchy theory, this exclusion reflects a gendered distribution of authority in which men monopolize political legitimacy and customary sovereignty, while women are positioned as dependents within domestic and ritual spheres. This structural arrangement is not merely cultural but constitutes a system of power that regulates access to resources, leadership, and voice. In several indigenous communities, including the Dani and Moi, decisions concerning land inheritance and customary governance are made exclusively by men. Women are allowed to cultivate land but lack formal ownership rights. This pattern illustrates how patriarchy operates as a material structure of exclusion, restricting women's economic autonomy and reinforcing dependency relations. Within Feminist International Relations (FIR), such localized gender hierarchies are understood as constitutive of global political economy, since land dispossession and resource governance are embedded in transnational extractive industries and state development agendas.

Table 1. Participation of Indigenous Women in Customary Leadership in Papua (2020–2025)

No	Regency/City	Total Customary Leaders	Women Customary Leaders	Percentage
1	Jayapura	50	2	4%
2	Sorong	35	1	2.8%
3	Jayawijaya	40	0	0%

Source: interview and reports from local indigeneous communities (2025)

The data in Table 1 were compiled through field interviews with customary council representatives in each regency and cross-checked with community documentation records between July-December 2025. The classification of “customary leaders” refers to formally recognized adat authorities within each community structure.

This table illustrates the unequal access of women to formal customary positions, indicating the reproduction of a patriarchal system that limits women’s involvement in strategic decision-making. Field research and in-depth interviews found that indigenous women’s access to formal education and skills training remains low, particularly in the remote areas of Papua (Titia Erika Sarlota Awom, 2025). Based on research data from Jayawijaya Regency, only about 30% of indigenous women complete secondary education, compared to 55% of men (Yuni Mariani Manik, 2023). This educational gap reinforces inequalities in formal employment, community leadership, and access to government assistance or development programs. This situation underscores a significant gap that affects women’s participation in social, economic, and political life.

Data from the Papua Provincial Statistics Agency (BPS) 2024 shows that participation in secondary education among women, especially in remote areas, remains lower than that of men, with a gap of approximately 5-10 percent. Contributing factors include domestic responsibilities assigned to women, early marriage, distance to schools, and cultural norms that prioritize boys’ education (BPS, 2025). This educational disparity directly impacts women’s limited access to formal employment, health information, and their ability to actively participate in community development.

In the economic sphere, Papuan indigenous women play a crucial role in traditional food production, small-scale trade, and household resource management. However, their contributions are often considered “domestic work” with no formal economic value. Patriarchal structures position men as the primary managers of land and assets, making it difficult for women to gain access to capital, land, or broader business opportunities (Worry Mambusy Manoby M. S., 2023). This situation is further exacerbated when industrial, mining, or infrastructure projects take place in indigenous territories, as women often lose access to land and livelihoods, while decision-making is entirely controlled by men or external actors. Studies in West Papua show that although Kokoda women significantly contribute to their families’ economic needs, their role is still considered secondary and receives little recognition in local economic planning (Evie Syalviana, 2021).

Customary patriarchal structures often grant ownership rights over land and key assets to men, while women only have hereditary rights to use or manage the land without formal ownership. This condition reinforces economic inequality, as women continue to bear family

responsibilities without legal capacity or access to capital to develop more independent enterprises. Economic empowerment approaches in Papua, as noted in several studies, indicate that interventions combining training, access to capital, and recognition of women's roles within the local economic system are crucial for reducing this structural marginalization (Karnida Retta Ginting, 2022).

The impact of patriarchy on the health of Papuan indigenous women is both significant and complex, influenced by geographic, social, cultural, and economic factors. One of the major challenges is limited access to basic health services in many remote indigenous areas, making it difficult for women to obtain antenatal care (ANC), safe childbirth, immunizations, and reproductive health check-ups. In this context, the maternal mortality rate (MMR) in Papua Province is reported to be high among the highest in Indonesia reflecting the ongoing lack of quality and accessible health services for women, especially in remote indigenous communities. For example, according to national health media reports, Papua Province has the highest maternal mortality rate in the country, largely due to delays in accessing the "3 Delays" (late decision-making, late arrival at health facilities, and late provision of care), which are commonly experienced by women in remote indigenous areas (Dewi, 2024).

Patriarchy is also reflected in socio-cultural norms that hinder women from accessing reproductive health services. A qualitative study in the Asmat community in South Papua Province shows that the high maternal and infant mortality rates among them are closely linked to strong traditional cultural values and norms, which sometimes restrict women from making health decisions for themselves and can even lead to delays in managing complications (Ruth Yogi, 2025). The study reveals that indigenous communities that strictly maintain traditional practices tend to experience delays in detecting health risks and managing health cases, thereby increasing the risk of maternal and infant mortality compared to communities that have begun to adapt to modern health services.

In addition to being excluded from formal decision-making, Papuan indigenous women also face symbolic violence in the form of restrictions on freedom of expression. Patriarchal cultural norms teach that women are "not appropriate" to interrupt or oppose men, causing many women to fear speaking out due to the risk of social sanctions, stigma, or even physical threats (Rights, 2021). In many cases, women who challenge customary decisions or claim rights to land are socially punished or labeled as rebellious, which further reinforces their marginalization. AMAN's report states that indigenous women in Boven Digoel Regency who advocate for land and environmental rights face intimidation, eviction, and even criminalization by state authorities and non-state actors, leading most women to remain silent (Makuba, 2024). This underscores how patriarchy not only restricts women's formal access but also limits their mental freedom and ability to express themselves. In addition to being excluded from formal decision-making spaces, Papuan indigenous women often face symbolic violence that curtails their freedom to speak and voice opinions. Patriarchal cultural norms in many indigenous communities teach that women should not interrupt or oppose men in customary or social forums, causing women's voices to be frequently ignored or deemed invalid (Papua, 2025). Other academic studies emphasize that cultural discrimination and customary law in Papua also contribute to the gradual restriction of women's participation in collective decision-making. In a participatory action research involving 100 indigenous women across several districts in Papua, it was found that women are often prevented from participating in decision-making processes concerning the management of land and forests key sources of their livelihoods by both customary structures and by companies and government authorities (Uswatun Khasanah, 2024).

Inequality in the International Discourse on Indigenous Peoples

Papuan indigenous women face a dual inequality: marginalization at the local level due to patriarchal structures and social subordination, as well as the neglect of their voices in international discourse on indigenous peoples' rights. Although global instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and CEDAW recognize the rights of women and indigenous women, their implementation on the ground remains very limited (Rights, 2021). Research by Asia Justice & Rights shows that Papuan indigenous women involved in advocacy for land, environmental, and natural resource rights are often not recognized as key actors in international forums, resulting in their experiences and knowledge being underrepresented in the global discourse (Faturahmah, 2025).

In addition, structural and cultural barriers at the local level such as customary patriarchy, limited education, lack of access to international networks, and social norms restricting women's mobility also hinder their participation in global advocacy (Nusantara, 2024). A study by Megashift emphasizes that the role of indigenous women as environmental stewards and forest conservers is often unrecognized in international policies, even though they possess significant capacity as agents of change (Sa'diah, 2025). This inequality is further compounded by stereotypical views that position women merely as supporters of men rather than as decision-makers, resulting in their contributions to grassroots diplomacy and human rights advocacy being inadequately documented (Darwin Mezhak Loduwik Rumpumbo, 2025). The gap between the formal recognition of indigenous women's rights at the international level and local realities shows that global forums often represent indigenous communities through a male perspective, while women remain marginalized (Puspa, 2025).

Although international forums such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and global instruments like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognize the rights of indigenous peoples, including women, many studies find that indigenous women's issues are often treated as part of general indigenous peoples' discussions, without highlighting their unique experiences of dual discrimination both as women and as members of indigenous communities (Friedrich, 2023). This lack of clear representation results in the specific experiences of Papuan indigenous women in facing social, economic, and political marginalization receiving little serious attention in international discourse. Consequently, the global agenda on indigenous peoples has not adequately accommodated the needs and voices of indigenous women in a specific and meaningful way.

A study conducted at the Skouw Border Market (Indonesia-Papua New Guinea), where Papuan indigenous women have limited access to trade in traditional commodities such as local crops, crafts, and agricultural products, while non-Papuan traders selling commercial goods dominate due to government-backed capital and access to private investors, highlights a form of structural inequality in local economic development. The study emphasizes that disparities in local economic participation illustrate how global development discourse and economic policies often overlook indigenous women as social actors with their own specific priorities and challenges (ristien Maryen, 2025).

Furthermore, several academic studies show that Papuan indigenous women involved in human rights advocacy and grassroots diplomacy often do not receive formal recognition or equal representation in international forums, even though they play a crucial role in environmental protection and the enforcement of their communities collective rights (Emy Handayani, 2023). A study conducted by Rumpumbo, Cornellisen, and Subandi found that although Papuan women are active in building resistance movements rooted in local communities and engage in advocacy for social justice and peace, their voices remain weakly integrated into the mainstream narrative of international relations due to local patriarchal structural barriers and historical marginalization (Darwin Mezhak Loduwik Rumpumbo, 2025). These findings highlight a gap

between the ideal international norms recognizing indigenous peoples rights and the local reality, which remains patriarchal and exclusive. This underscores the need for critical approaches such as Feminist International Relations to highlight and advocate for the voices of Papuan indigenous women in global arenas, including human rights and sustainable development forums. Such an approach helps break the homogenization of the Indigenous Peoples discourse by positioning the experiences and interests of indigenous women as an inseparable part of the international discourse.

Resistance and Strategies of Papuan Indigenous Women Against Structural Marginalization

Papuan indigenous women face dual marginalization: as women within a patriarchal society and as members of indigenous communities that are marginalized in both national and global development (Uswatun Khasanah, 2024). Local patriarchy restricts their access to education, customary leadership, land ownership, and formal economic opportunities. Meanwhile, international discourse often conflates indigenous women's issues with those of indigenous communities in general, so the specific experiences of indigenous women in facing social, economic, and political discrimination receive insufficient attention (Darwin Mezhak Loduwik Rumpumbo, 2025). This situation requires Papuan indigenous women to develop multidimensional resistance and empowerment strategies, encompassing economic initiatives, education, legal advocacy, grassroots diplomacy, and political participation.

In the economic sphere, Papuan indigenous women have developed empowerment strategies based on local wisdom. They actively participate in micro-enterprises, cooperatives, and trade in traditional markets, such as at the Skouw Border Market on the Indonesia-Papua New Guinea border, selling local agricultural products, handicrafts, and traditional foods (Kristien Maryen Cenderawasih, 2025). Although their access to capital and distribution networks remains limited compared to non-Papuan traders, this involvement not only increases family income but also strengthens women's social standing within the community and provides them with space to make economic decisions and maintain local food sovereignty (Waromi, 2023).

In addition to economic strategies, indigenous women are actively engaged in advocacy for land rights, environmental protection, and sustainable development. A clear example can be seen in the movements of Amungme women in Mimika and Kamoro women in Central Papua, who resist land dispossession caused by mining projects and infrastructure development (Pratama, 2023). They engage in grassroots diplomacy, build local advocacy networks, and lobby the government to recognize the rights of women and indigenous communities. Although their contributions are significant in protecting collective rights and the environment, studies show that indigenous women's voices are rarely integrated into the mainstream international relations narrative due to institutional patriarchy and historical marginalization (Darwin Mezhak Loduwik Rumpumbo, 2025).

In the realms of education and law, Papuan indigenous women pursue empowerment strategies through legal literacy and awareness of women's rights. Training programs conducted in Senamai Village, Yokari District, enable women to claim land rights, negotiate compensation for land dispossession, and advocate for girls' access to education and health services. These strategies help women overcome local barriers while enhancing their capacity to participate in national and international policy forums (Waromi, 2023).

In addition, indigenous women are actively involved in political participation and policy advocacy, including through the Papuan People's Assembly, customary institutions, and human

rights advocacy networks. Collaboration with civil society organizations and international forums enables indigenous women's voices to be heard in inclusive and sustainable development planning (Karnida Retta Ginting, 2022).

Based on these practices, policy recommendations that can be implemented include: (1) strengthening community-based economies through access to capital, entrepreneurship training, and market facilities that support indigenous women (2) improving education and legal literacy to enhance women's advocacy capacity regarding customary rights, national law, and human rights (3) providing formal spaces for indigenous women in political and policy decision-making and (4) recognizing women's roles in environmental conservation and local resource management. These strategies not only address structural marginalization but also affirm Papuan indigenous women as agents of social, economic, and environmental change, while strengthening inclusive development that respects human rights, local wisdom, and gender equality.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Papuan indigenous women experience layered structural marginalization, stemming from a combination of local patriarchal social systems and inequalities within the international indigenous peoples discourse. Within patriarchal customary structures, indigenous women are systematically excluded from decision-making, ownership and management of resources, as well as access to education, health services, and formal leadership. This situation not only reinforces gender disparities but also limits the capacity of indigenous women to determine the future and welfare of their communities. At the global level, although international instruments such as UNDRIP, CEDAW, and the UNPFII forum normatively recognize indigenous women's rights, the specific experiences of Papuan indigenous women remain under-articulated in international discourse and policy. The indigenous peoples discourse tends to be generalized and does not fully accommodate the realities of the dual discrimination faced by indigenous women. This reflects a gap between global normative commitments and their implementation at the local level. Nevertheless, this study also emphasizes that Papuan indigenous women are not merely victims of marginalization but active agents of change, developing resistance and empowerment strategies through community-based economic strengthening, advocacy for land and environmental rights, legal literacy, and grassroots diplomacy. Using a Feminist International Relations perspective, this research highlights the importance of positioning indigenous women's experiences as a central subject of analysis in International Relations studies, in order to build a global governance and development framework that is more inclusive, just, and gender-sensitive.

This study is limited by its focus on selected indigenous communities in Papua, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among all Papuan indigenous women. In addition, the reliance on qualitative interviews and participatory observation may limit the generalizability of findings, though it provides rich contextual insights.

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