

## **Achieving gender equality: an analysis of women empowerment through ecotourism in Kadamaian, Kota Belud, Sabah**

### **ABSTRACT**

Women empowerment is a critical aspect in achieving gender equality. Gender equality refers to the situation in which women and men enjoy equal opportunities, access, rights and responsibilities in all aspects of life. In the context of this article, ecotourism is considered as a 'tool' that can empower women economically, socially and politically. Active participation of women in ecotourism activities enables them to be involved in decision-making, increasing their access, control and ownership of natural resources. The main objective of this research is to identify the roles of women involved in ecotourism in Kadamaian, Kota Belud. The second objective is to assess the level of women empowerment involved in ecotourism activities. Indicators used to assess women empowerment elements are the level of their access to ownership and control of resources, their involvement in decision-making, skills development, self-confidence and social networks development. The assessment of the level of women empowerment is also examined in terms of resource management capabilities and the ability to compete with males in the management of extreme activities in the ecotourism sector. Qualitative methods which are used in this research include in-depth interviews, focus group discussion (FGD), observations as well as participatory in ecotourism activities that featured women as facilitators of activities. The findings show that there is an element of women empowerment in ecotourism activities. A total of 44 female respondents were interviewed in this study. The findings indicate that 22 per cent of women own and operate a homestay, 15 per cent of women lead community-based ecotourism projects, and 15 per cent of women are skilled hikers and jungle-trekking guides. However, there are still more women involved in cleaning and maintenance tasks at the camping sites and homestays, which accounts for 42 per cent and the rest of the women are horse handlers, carpenters, involved in landscapes, handlers for activities such as rafting, and camping activities. The findings of this study can serve as an input to relevant agencies in formulating policies and strategies for empowering rural women.