



AKTEA Conference

**Women in Fisheries and aquaculture: lessons from
the past, current actions and ambitions for the future**

Santiago de Compostela (Spain)

10th to 13th November 2004

Conference Proceedings

Editors

Katia Frangoudes

Univ. Bretagne Occidentale, CEDEM

José J. Pascual-Fernández

Univ. La Laguna, ICCPPSS

Organizing institutions

Université de Bretagne Occidentale, CEDEM

U. La Laguna, I. U. Ciencias Políticas y Sociales

Consellería de Pesca e Asuntos Marítimos (Galicia)

U. Madeira Departamento das Ciências da Educação

U. Tromsø, Dep. of Planning and Community Studies

Financing Institutions:

D.G. Fisheries, «AKTEA Conference» - contract number N°2003/C115/07-16
Consellería de Pesca e Asuntos Marítimos, Xunta de Galicia
Université de Bretagne Occidentale, CEDEM
Universidad de La Laguna
Région Bretagne

Publisher:
Asociación Canaria de Antropología
La Laguna, Tenerife 2005
ISBN: 84-88429-09-6
Depósito Legal: TF929-2005

WOMEN'S UNPAID LABOR IN THE SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES SECTOR IN MALAYSIA

Poh-Sze Choo

WorldFish Center, Penang, Malaysia

Abstract

Recent studies have shown that women are actively involved in the small-scale fisheries sector in Malaysia working very often without pay in the family businesses. Activities carried out by women include small-scale fish processing, net mending, cleaning and gutting fish, fish vending, feed preparation and feeding fish in aquaculture projects. Planners and policy makers must recognize the unpaid work for women so that the needs of women will not be left behind in development planning. When women performing unpaid work are not considered in the official workforce statistics, planners may misconstrue the true situation in a community. For example, planners may give low priority to building a government subsidized, child-care centre in a fishing community where women were not recorded officially as part of the workforce, even though they have put in many hours of hard work in the family businesses. Women may also be deprived of opportunities to take bank loans to start their small businesses, and may miss out on opportunities for self-improvement because of wrongful classification and discrimination. When women's labour is not accounted for, fish will inevitably be sold at a subsidized price at the expense of the fisher. This paper examines the position of the unpaid women's workforce in the small-scale fisheries sector in Malaysia, and its implications to the fishers and their families. It also examines ways of how unpaid labour can be valued.

Introduction

Throughout Southeast Asia, women have contributed significantly to the labour force in the fisheries industries. Women's contribution in this region hinges heavily on fish sorting, processing and marketing, where they often comprise the dominant workforce. In the small-scale fisheries sector in Southeast Asia, women are generally involved with family businesses at the artisanal level, performing tasks like processing salted, dried fish, mending nets, feeding fish in small-scale aquaculture projects targeted to produce food for the family and the surplus for sale to neighbours and friends. Women are involved to a lesser extent in active fishing. Despite this active engagement, the lower status accorded to women in many of the Southeast Asian countries also mean that their contributions are often unrecognized, not valued or are undervalued. For example, women working in family businesses are often unpaid and their labour not officially taken into account by the state. It is the norm to consider

Malaysia's population: Ethnicity and religion

Malaysia's population of about 25.5 million comprises three major non-indigenous ethnic groups: the Malays, Chinese and Indians constituting 50.3%, 23.8% and 7.1% of the population respectively. Apart from these three ethnic groups, 11% of the population comprise the indigenous population known as the "orang asli". In Peninsular Malaysia, the indigenous people, consisting among others, the Hma Btsisi, Jakun, Temuan, Semai, Mahmeri, Orang Laut and Orang Seletar constitute only 0.7% of the population in the Peninsula. The indigenous population in East Malaysia is significantly larger, and comprises groups like the Dayaks, Ibans and Penans from Sarawak, and the Rungus, Dusuns, Bajaus, Kadazans and the Orang Sungai from Sabah. Indigenous people comprise more than 50% of the population in Sarawak and about 66% of the Sabah population. Many of these indigenous people profess traditional beliefs but a considerable number have converted to Islam or Christianity. Indigenous people who live by the river or coast rely heavily on fishing for livelihood.

Malaysia is a multi-religious country with Islam as the national religion. The west coast of Peninsular Malaysia is more urbanized than the east coast of the Peninsula and East Malaysia. The Chinese, the majority of whom are Buddhists, Taoists or Christians live mainly in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The Malays, who are Muslims, form the majority of the population in the east coast states in Peninsular Malaysia. The two East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and the east coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu in Peninsular Malaysia are less developed than most of the other states in Peninsular Malaysia.

Although much progress has been made by women in the last three decades in the socioeconomic and educational fields, these changes are significant mainly in the urban areas, especially in the west coast states of Peninsular Malaysia. Life in the rural areas like the fishing communities on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia remains basically unchanged over the decades, and culturally, especially among the Muslims, women are often subordinate to men. Indigenous communities are, however egalitarian, and women and men are often treated equally.

Small-scale fishing in Malaysia

There is no standard definition for the small-scale or artisanal fisher. An artisanal fisher usually uses a small fishing vessel, which is either non-motorized or is equipped with an outboard engine; in a few cases an inboard engine may be used. Artisanal gears include the bag net, gill net, trammel net, beach seine, fish trap, cast net, hook and line, stake net, barrier net and lift net. An artisanal fisher usually makes only day trips; their vessels are usually equipped with a simple icebox to hold their daily catch. Artisanal fishers include mollusc collectors, who utilize very simple tools or their bare hands for the collection of sedentary shellfish like cockles, clams, mussels and oysters. Artisanal fishers also carry

out small-scale cage or pen culture as well as pond culture of low to medium value fish. They may culture molluscs such as oysters and mussels in coastal areas.

In Malaysia, fishing is an occupation dominated by the Malays and the indigenous population. Together they constitute around 60% of the estimated 80,000 fishers. Likewise, these two groups dominate small-scale fishing, which contributes around 20% of the 1,272,078 tonnes of the marine landings in 2002 (Anon 2004). Apart from fishing, small-scale fishers may supplement their income by culturing fish in cages or ponds using fry and trash fish, which they have caught while fishing for food fish.

The mere mention of the word "fisher" conjures up a picture of poor people eking out a living from artisanal fishing and living in dilapidated conditions. Globally, artisanal fishers have often been regarded as the poorest of the poor. In Malaysia, factors responsible for poverty in the fishing sector include the inability to own fishing vessels, the existence of uneconomical boats, the geographic and social isolation of fishers and the intense competition among fishers for a limited resource (Hotta and Wang 1985). Artisanal fishers are often subjected to exploitation from middlemen; fishers are often indebted to the latter for loans and credit. Middlemen are also boat owners and fishers may be compelled to sell their catches at lower than average prices to their benefactors.

Many countries, including Malaysia, attempt to solve middlemen exploitation by offering alternatives in the form of fishers' associations or cooperatives. However, some fishers do not consider the middlemen as exploitative and indicate their willingness to sell their catches to middlemen who offer them credit and loans under a very informal and bureaucracy-free system (see Merlijin 1989).

According to the Department of Fisheries, Malaysia in a study conducted in 1983 in Peninsular Malaysia (quoted from Hotta and Wang 1985), there was a surplus of 27,676 fishers, which accounted for 37% of the total number of fishers; out of this surplus, 11,500 were artisanal fishers. A surplus fisher was classified as one who operated at the subsistence level with very low returns under the circumstances of limited capital and resources, low prices and poor marketing system (Hotta and Wang 1985).

The Malaysian government has identified fishers along with padi farmers, rubber and coconut smallholders and estate workers as groups prone to poverty. In poor households, women are obliged to engage in domestic chores, and to assist their husbands in the family business, unlike their counterparts from the middle- and upper income groups, who can afford to employ maids to do their household chores. Since the 1980s, the Malaysian government has initiated a program, the Fishermen's Relocation Program to resettle fishermen by offering them alternative employment opportunities and at the same time to reduce the fishing effort on an overexploited resource. However, this scheme has not claimed any significant success and the population of artisanal fishers remains high. In 2002, the Department of Fisheries, Malaysia recorded a total of 82,630 fishers among which 40,031 were artisanal fishers (Anon 2004). In Malaysia,

the open access nature of artisanal fishing attracts poor people who drift into fishing especially when economic times are bad and they are not able to find other forms of work.

Women's work profile in the small-scale Malay fishing communities

In the Malay culture, men are recognized as the head of the households. Women who work in small-scale fishing communities include wives and daughters of fishermen. These women workers can be grouped into three categories - the paid worker, the self-employed and the unpaid family worker.

Yahaya (1994) surveyed two Malay fishing communities in the east coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu in Peninsular Malaysia and noted that 51% of working women were self-employed, with 31.4% as paid workers and 17.6% involved in unpaid labour. Women in the self-employed and unpaid labour categories often worked up to 10-12 hours daily, usually undertaking the work simultaneously with domestic chores. In the unpaid labour category, equal number of respondents reported working between 4-6 hours a day, and 10-12 hours daily. 46.7% of the women workers from all the three categories reported that they worked seven days a week and that they were involved with economic activities the whole year round. 84% of the women worked from home or at the vicinity of their home. Most of these women workers were either lowly-educated or illiterate; only 1.4% had received a secondary education comprising 12 years in school.

Yahaya's survey showed that more married women were engaged in self-employment in contrast to single women where a higher number worked in paid jobs. The proportion of single women (1.4%) working in unpaid labour was also lower than in married women (12.5%).

According to Yahaya (1994), unpaid work carried out by women included: work in aquaculture production systems such as net weaving and mending, collection of fingerlings for aquaculture and preparation of fish feeds; fishing activities such as unloading and sorting catch, drying and mending nets; and tasks involved in transportation, distribution and marketing the catch.

Women's work profile in the indigenous fishing community

Among many of the indigenous groups in Malaysia such as the Kadazans, Ibans and the Hma Btsisis, men and women have equal rights and they live a lifestyle that is more integrated than divisive. The Ibans (also known as the sea Dayaks), who constitute about 30% of the population in Sarawak, lives in an atmosphere of reciprocity, cooperation, competition, freedom and egalitarianism (Kedit 1999). Iban women have traditionally played an equal role in public meetings, and household heads in the Iban community are women as often as men (Gomes 1911).

Nowak (1988) noted that an indigenous group, the Hma Btsisi living in the state of Selangor in Peninsular Malaysia does not segregate men's and women's

roles in riverine and coastal fishing, and women participate in a wide variety of activities including active fishing. They believe that marriage should be based on cooperation and equality between husband and wife, and the division of labour between husband and wife is based on a complementation of tasks. Duties around the house are performed interchangeably. A husband may tend to the children while the wife is cooking and vice versa.

Nowak reported that women are not prohibited from adopting any fishing activities, although women perform some activities like hook and line fishing more frequently than other means of fishing. Gill net fishing, crabbing and mollusc collection are usually done together by the married couple. The Btsisi depends on a cash economy, a husband hands over the earnings to his wife who manages the family finances.

Valuation of unpaid labour

Among the most controversial issues debated by many women groups, economists and policy makers are what constitutes work and how to value unpaid work. The latter is not just an issue in the South; many in developed countries also grapple with this issue and their implications on society and a country's economy. Most unpaid work is performed by women; globally, it is estimated to be worth US\$11 trillion (Anon. 2003).

Work is conventionally defined as an activity in which a person contributes towards the national economy by getting a job done, usually outside the home and for which a salary is given. Domestic chores done at home, basically to cater for home needs and consumption are usually not considered work and are not paid. The United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA) considers work to be part of the national economy and it involves market transactions, consumption, investment, and saving measures in addition to income and production levels (Waring 2003). Hence domestic chores whose benefits are produced and consumed within the same household do not count as an economic activity under the UNSNA system. Many concern groups, however, are proposing that domestic duties should be recognized as productive work with a monetary value.

Valuation of unpaid work is important because it makes comparison possible with other kinds of work; it translates unpaid work into monetary terms that governments can understand and allows the data generated to be absorbed into mainstream economic statistics. The value data also have the power to unequivocally demonstrate the contribution of unpaid work to the economy, and form a basis for determination of entitlement to society's resources (Dresher 2003).

Many methods, some of which may involve complex mathematics, are used to value a woman's unpaid work. More simplistic methods such as the replacement value method and the opportunity method can be used as a first cut to value women's unpaid labour. The replacement value is calculated on the basis of how much it would cost to replace unpaid workers with paid workers

based on current hourly or monthly wages for comparable work. The opportunity method is calculated on the amount that the women will earn in the paid labour market, instead of doing unpaid work from home. A women's educational level and other marketable assets will play a significant role in the latter method.

Valuation of unpaid labour from the small-scale Malay fishing communities

There are two categories of unpaid labour in the small-scale fishing communities, mainly domestic chores and work related to their husband's business. Since these two categories of work are carried out simultaneously and are both manual in nature, they could be treated and valued together as manual work.

Replacement Value Method

The replacement value method can be used to assess the value of the unpaid chores, which could be measured against the procurement of a maid to help out with the chores. The monthly salary to employ a maid to do household duties is estimated at around RM400. It is common for live-in housemaids to work between 6 am to 8 pm everyday, clocking in 14 hours of work a day with a couple of hours of short breaks in between, thus equalling the number of hours put in by women working without pay at home in fishing communities. Another RM350 should be included monthly for food and accommodation for maintaining live-in maids. They must be given a rest day a week and the Malaysian Labour Laws require the employer to pay double the amount for working on a rest day. Hence another RM24 should be included to the pay per week or RM96 per month. The total pay to maintain a maid would be RM846 or US\$223 a month, using an exchange rate of RM3.8 to US\$1.

Opportunity method

Since women from fishing communities have no special skills and are lowly educated, the job available to them in the labour market will be working as a maid or doing other forms of manual work. The monetary value of the unpaid women's labour will therefore be similar to the value obtained by using the replacement method.

Implications of the monetary value of women's unpaid labor

The poverty line monthly income in Peninsular Malaysia is estimated at RM510 (US\$134) and around RM 685 (US\$180) in Sabah and RM584 (US\$154) in Sarawak for a household size of 4.6 in Peninsular Malaysia, 4.9 in Sabah and 4.8 in Sarawak (Economic Planning Unit, 2002). In families that live at just above the poverty line, women doing unpaid labour at home are actually contributing about 1.2 to 1.7 times the salary earned by their husbands. This will also mean that a single father or widower with a family with young children or

elderly parents who do not contribute to domestic chores and other work will actually have to earn 2.1 to 2.9 times the income above the poverty line to escape the poverty trap. Hence, women's unpaid work is very important and has great significance in a poor family.

By not factoring in the cost of women's unpaid labour, coupled with their inability to control the price of fish, fishers ironically, are subsidizing the price of fish when they can ill afford to do so. In an ideal situation, when fishers have a free hand to control the price of fish, fishers should include not only the cost of fuel, their own labour cost, and the amortized costs of the fishing equipments and vessel, but also the monetary value of women's unpaid labour. When women's labour is not accounted for, fish will inevitably be sold at an unfair price at the expense of the fishers.

Artisanal fishers often lack the acumen and marketing knowledge to understand the supply and demand situations so as to enable their catches to be marketed at an optimal price. On top of it, training courses conducted by the Department of Fisheries, Malaysia to fishers and fish farmers normally impart only technical skills. It is important that fishers are also given basic training on market economics so that they will be able to understand the basic principles on pricing their products. Cold room facilities should also be made available to fishers and fish farmers so that they will not be forced to sell their fish immediately after landing when demand is low.

Conclusion

Women who work in small-scale fishing communities comprise predominantly the Malays and indigenous population. While indigenous women living in an egalitarian society have equal rights with men, women in Malay households are subordinate to men who are the head of the households. Women manage the finances in some indigenous society and in the Iban community women are heads of household as frequently as men. Women in Malay fishing communities are often involved in unpaid labour. There are many reasons why women's unpaid labour needs to be recognized, and why valuation of women's unpaid labour is important. When fishers are not able to control the price of fish due to their indebtedness to middlemen and when women's labour is not accounted for in monetary terms, fish will be sold at a subsidized price with the fishers unfairly bearing the financial brunt.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Stephen J. Hall, Director General of the World Fish Center, for his comments on the manuscript and his interest in my work.

References

- Anon, 'Women and unpaid work'. Women & the economy: a project of UNPAC. (<http://unpac.ca/economy/unpaidwork.html>). 2003.
- Anon, *Annual Fisheries Statistics 2002*. Vol. 1. Department of Fisheries Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. 2004.
- Beneria, L. 'Accounting for women's work: the progress of two decades', in: Visvanathan, N. (co-ordinator), Duggan, L., Nisonoff, L. and Wiegiersma, N. (Eds), *The women, gender and development reader*. Zed Books Ltd., New Jersey, USA. 1997, .112-118.
- Dresher, E. 'Valuing unpaid work.' Women & the economy: a project of UNPAC. (<http://unpac.ca/economy/valuingunpaidwork.html>), 2003.
- Economic Planning Unit. 2002. Poverty eradication: Malaysia's experience. (unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN013994.pdf).
- Frangoudes, K.; O'Doherty, J. 'Legal recognition of women's contribution in fisheries and aquaculture in the European Union.' in: World Fish Center, *Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries Proceedings*, Penang, Malaysia, December 1, 2004., Penang, 2005 (in press).
- Gomes, E. H. *Seventeen years among the Sea Dayaks of Borneo: a record of intimate association*. London, Seeley 1911, 343
- Hotta, M.; Wang, L. T. *Final draft: fishermen relocation program in Peninsular Malaysia. FAO Technical Cooperation Programme on Assistance to Fisheries Development Authority of Malaysia* (Lembaga Kemajuan Ikan Malaysia). TCP/MAL/4403 Technical Report 1, 1985
- Kedit, P. M. Iban of Sarawak: A Southeast Asian Austronesian People. A public lecture given at the "Festival of Austronesian Culture" in Taitung, Taiwan. http://tour.taitung.gov.tw/festivity/Chinese_T/consult04.htm), 1999
- Merlijin, A. G. 'The role of middlemen in small-scale fisheries: a case study of Sarawak, Malaysia', *Development and change*, 20(4) SAGE, London, Newbury Park and New Delhi. 1989, 683-700
- Nowak, B. S. 'The cooperative nature of women's and men's roles in Btsisi marine extracting activities', in: J. Nadel-Klein & D. L. Davis, (Eds), *To work and to weep: women in fishing economies*. Memorial University of Newfoundland St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. 1988, 51-72.
- World survey on the role of women in development. New York: United Nations, in: United Nations Office at Vienna. 1989
- Waring, M. 'Counting for something!: recognizing women's contribution to the global economy through alternative accounting systems.' *Gender and Development* 11(1), 2003. 35-43
- Yahaya, J. *Women in small-scale fisheries in Malaysia*, University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur. 1994