

BUILDING CAPACITY TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

A Case Study of Langkawi Island

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Abstract

Women in small developing islands are struggling for survival in a world where the physical resources they have traditionally depended upon are degraded and diminishing in the face of increasing population and industrial pressure. Though they are an economically active age group, they have not acquired the skills necessary to make an adequate living, as there are insufficient jobs for all those in need of them. The main objective of this article is to assess Langkawi women's socio-economic background, their perceptions on development and participation in rural development. Data was obtained from household surveys, informal interviews and focus group discussions conducted in 2005 and 2007 in Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting on Langkawi Island. The main findings indicate marginality in location, lack of skill and training, the importance of education and need for more sustainable income generating activities for women on the islands. It is concluded that education is the key agent of capacity building to uplift women's livelihoods and improve women's participation in rural development. Further studies should be developed to suggest various innovative skill training and educational opportunities for women, as well as members of the community at large, in order to strengthen their quality of life.

Keywords

Island development, women participation, Langkawi Geopark, empowerment

Introduction

Women play an active role in their community not only as household providers but also as socio-economic contributors (Wilkinson and Pratiwi, 1995). In Malaysia, in 2009, 13.9 million of the total population consisted of women. About 48% of women fall within the working age group (15-64 years), and of these only one-third contribute toward the total labor force. However, at the same time a total of 155,600 women were unemployed, which included 16,182 married women, 2178 widows and 2956 divorcees in 2009. Empowerment of women will be a key agenda in the 10th Malaysia Plan, as the Government plans to increase its efforts towards addressing issues confronting women to enable them to realise their full potential and participate more effectively in the economic and social development of the country (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2011-2015). The educational attainment for women in tertiary education was 50% in 2000 which subsequently rose to 55% in 2005 and eventually 65.9% in 2008. Though they are an economically active age group, they have not acquired the skills necessary to make an adequate living, as there are insufficient jobs. Malaysian women's economic contribution is usually not properly quantified (Ariffin, 1992).

In the case of small developing islands, the Islanders socio-economic condition is vulnerable because their economies tend to be based on a single or limited range of activities,

particularly for women participating in the labour force (Bass and Dalal-Clayton, 1995). This paper is based on research conducted in Langkawi Island located in the far northwestern corner of Peninsular Malaysia, in the state of Kedah. The island is recognised as one of Malaysia's premier tourism destinations, jump-started originally by its declaration as a duty free island in 1987. The establishment of the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) by the Federal Government was to ensure provision of tourism infrastructures and basic facilities were implemented. The process of socio-economic development in Langkawi has undergone transition from primarily agriculture and fisheries to tourism-based activities, involving local entrepreneurship, recreational and nature tourism activities. The inception of Langkawi as a duty free island has also brought systematic development to these islands and transformed them into a modern tourist destination (Leman et al., 2007). The Kedah State Government introduced an innovative sustainable development tool known as Geopark in 2006. Together with the assistance of LADA and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia researchers, Langkawi Island has been acknowledged as the 52nd Global Geopark under the auspices of UNESCO's Global Geoparks Network. Geopark gives emphasis to inclusivity, particularly local community involvement in conservation efforts (McKeever, 2009).

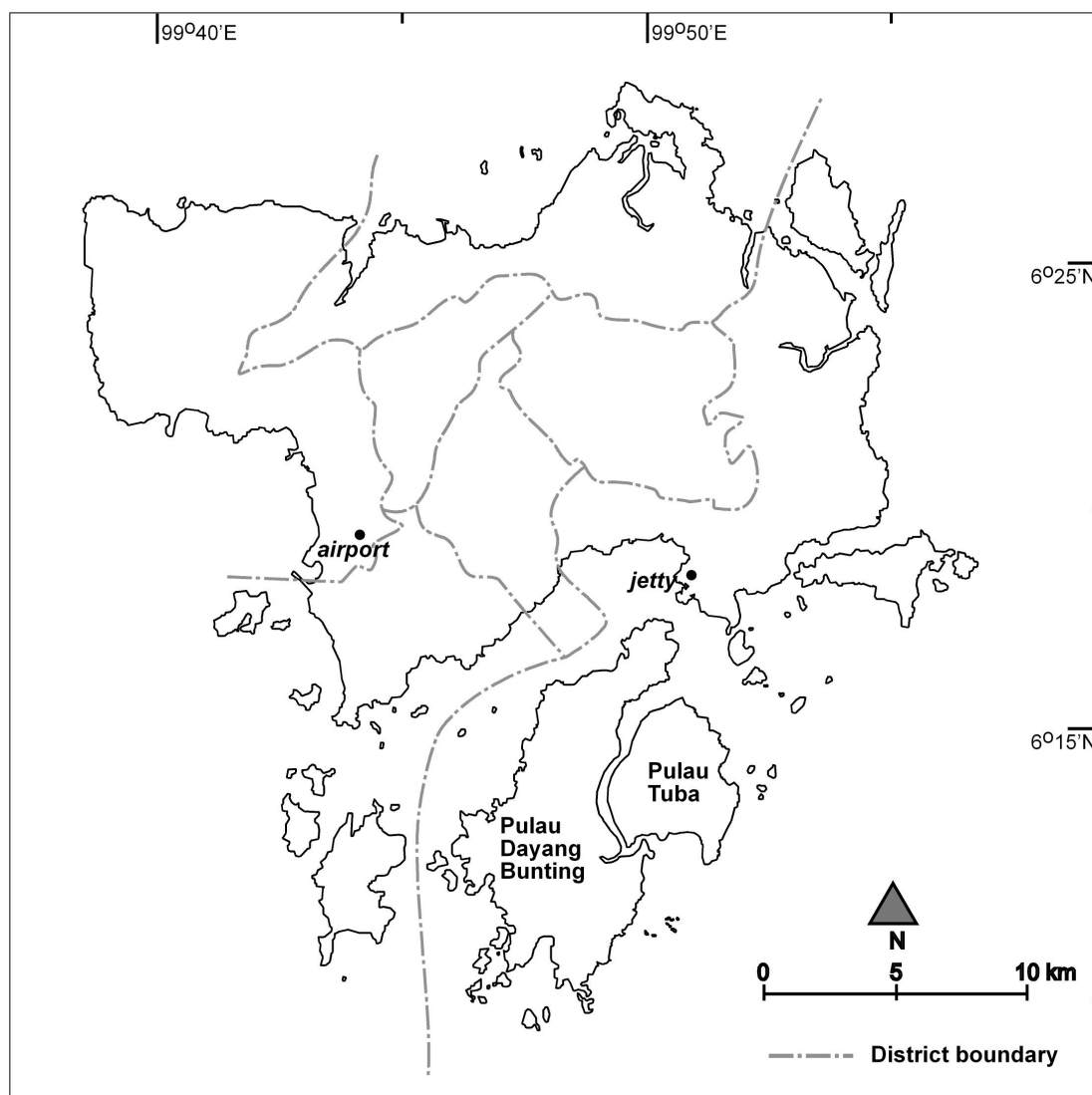
Rural development has generally been defined as an effort made by the government and the people to provide resources and make meaningful use of these resources in improving the quality of life of the community in the rural areas (Harrison, 1983; King and Nazaruddin Mohd, 1992). Participation of women in agriculture has declined rapidly whether in absolute terms or in relation to men, as indicated in the Ninth Malaysia Plan whereby women's participation dropped from 11.9% in 2000 to 9% in 2005, compared to men from 17.3% in 2000 to 15.2% in 2005 (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010). Women have been the equal partners of men in agricultural production but women's labor tends to be displaced at a faster rate than men's as modern technologies penetrate into the rural production system (M. Ismail, 2001). This could also be due to the changing emphasis of employment from agricultural to industrial sector.

Participation requires a principle of equity that enables people who do not have equal access to natural resources, economic and social goods to have their interests protected (Ajayi and Otuya, 2006). One means to create sustainable rural development is through giving the main actors (which means villagers who are living in the community) an equal opportunity to think about and plan for their own future (Orapin, 1996). Women's voices and concerns in the community are especially important to community development and welfare as most women are involved in meeting needs in the areas of social education, health and environmental projects, while men continue to pay more attention to economic, agricultural and infrastructural development. Combining the needs and concerns of both sides creates a more balanced community development plan.

This paper concerns research done in Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting, Langkawi Island, in 2005 and 2007 (see Map 1). There is still limited information regarding women's participation in rural development, particularly among the women in Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting, who are experiencing changes in their livelihoods in many ways (Ishak and Omar, 2005). The main aim of the paper is to assess Langkawi Island women's socio-economic background, their perceptions on development and participation in rural development.

Material and method

In order to assess women's participation in community development we examine their socioeconomic background and involvement in socio-economic activities. Households' surveys were administered in 2005 using census-based sampling.



Map 1. Location of Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting on Langkawi Island

A total of 570 responses of women from Pulau Tuba and 113 responses of women from Pulau Dayang Bunting were collected. These women represented the working age population of 15-64 years old. Meanwhile, informal interviews, focus group discussions and observation were carried out in phases during fieldwork from May to June in 2005 and March to April in 2007.

Results and discussion

Socioeconomic characteristics of the population

The population size of Langkawi was approximately 73,091 in 2000 with a distribution of 49.2% women. The working age (15-64 years) consists of 10,764 (76.8%) men and 3,253 (23.3%) women. Women's participation in the labor force is only a third of male participation. In general, most of the working age group falls under wage labor for both men and women. In terms of educational attainment, 78.4% of the people have received formal education.

The population size of Pulau Tuba, both men and women, is 1870 and 402 for Pulau Dayang Bunting. The ratio for men and women in Pulau Tuba was 99 men: 100 women and for Pulau Dayang Bunting was 119 men: 100 women. There are 683 women for both Pulau Tuba and Dayang Bunting within the working age group 15-64 years. The average age of women in Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting in 2005 was 27.9 years old. The marital status for women in Pulau Tuba was 67.4% married while in Pulau Dayang Bunting 63.7% were married (Table 1).

Status	Pulau Tuba				
	15-24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-44 (%)	45-64 (%)	Total (%)
Not married	128 (76.2)	5 (4.9)	8 (6.2)	7 (4.1)	148 (25.9)
Married	39 (23.2)	95 (93.1)	115 (89.1)	135 (78.9)	384 (67.4)
Widowed/Divorced	1 (0.6)	2 (2.0)	6 (4.7)	29 (16.9)	38 (6.6)
Total	168 (100.0)	102 (100.0)	129 (100.0)	171 (100.0)	570 (100.0)
Status	Pulau Dayang Bunting				
	15-24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-44 (%)	45-64 (%)	Total (%)
Not married	33 (86.8)	3 (18.8)	-	1 (3.2)	37 (32.7)
Married	5 (13.2)	13 (81.3)	27 (96.4)	27 (87.1)	72 (63.7)
Widowed/Divorced	-	-	1 (3.6)	3 (9.7)	4 (3.6)
Total	38 (100.0)	16 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	31 (100.0)	113 (100.0)

Table 1. Marital status of women in the age group 15-64 years old of Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting

In Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting, out of the total 683 women in the age group of 15-64 years in 2005, the percentage of women working in the formal economic sector was 15.4% as compared to 84.6% not working. The reasons given by those women for their unemployment include still being school age, housewives, unable to find suitable jobs or old age. Those who are working are mostly involved in wage labor activity, such as in the sales and service industries, and those working on their own, such as small food stalls operators, farmers, home-based tailors and small grocery owners. The average total monthly income obtained from working women (15-64) for Pulau Tuba was RM 656.70 and Pulau Dayang Bunting RM 720.41, which includes income from their main occupation, side income, and other financial sources (Table 2).

Types of income	Pulau Tuba (N= 88)	Pulau Dg. Bunting (N=27)	Total (N=115)
Main occupation	RM 616.17	RM 705.60	RM 637.16
Secondary occupation	RM 14.10	RM 1.85	RM 11.22
Other financial sources	RM 26.44	RM 13.00	RM 23.30
Total monthly income	RM 656.70	RM 720.41	RM 671.66

*USD 1= RM 3.10

Table 2. Total average monthly income* obtained from working women for Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting

In terms of social aspect, the educational status of the women indicated an improvement in relation to age cohort (see Table 3). Overall, most of the women born in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s have obtained their primary and secondary education unlike those born before the 1960s. However, the percentage of women who have received tertiary education or are attending tertiary institutions is still small. The findings of our survey indicate that the level of educational achievement reflects the type of employment obtained. Generally, those who did not receive any formal education are involved in the traditional sector such as paddy planters and rubber tappers, as compared with those who have received formal education, who are mostly working in manufacturing, service and sales sectors.

Pulau Tuba					
Age category (birth cohort)					
Educational Status	15-24 (1980-1990)	25-34 (1970-1980)	35-44 (1960-1970)	45+ (<1960)	Total (<1960-1990)
No schooling/Primary	45 (26.8)	58 (56.8)	94 (72.9)	161 (94.2)	358 (62.8)
Secondary	117 (69.6)	44(43.1)	33 (25.6)	10 (5.8)	204 (35.8)
College/University	6 (3.6)	-	2 (1.6)	-	8 (1.3)
Pulau Dayang Bunting					
Educational Status	15-24 (1980-1990)	25-34 (1970-1980)	35-44 (1960-1970)	45+ (<1960)	Total (<1960-1990)
No schooling/Primary	9 (23.7)	9 (56.3)	22 (78.6)	27 (87.1)	67 (59.3)
Secondary	26 (68.4)	6 (37.5)	6 (21.4)	4 (12.9)	42 (37.2)
College/University	3 (7.9)	1 (6.2)	-	-	4 (3.5)

Table 3. Educational status for women in the age category of 15-64 years by location

Women's roles and position

Women's position in the household is dependent on her role in decision making (R. Ismail, 2001). There are two types of decision-making. Firstly, there is major decision-making concerning such things as buying an asset, children's education and marriage and secondly, there is minor decision-making such as that concerned with daily budgeting. In general, this study found that for both islands most of the major decisions were made through discussions between husband and wife. As for minor decision-making, especially on daily

budgeting and expenditure, that is still considered as primarily a women's/mother's role in the family. Most respondents seemed to be in agreement that the role of primary income provider is the responsibility of men/fathers while supplemental income is provided by women/mothers or children of working age.

Skill and involvement in income generating activities

Local people equipped with resources and knowledge have the potential to use the advantage for the improvement of their livelihoods. However, due to the lack of exposure and necessary skill, they are unable to use these resources to their fullest potential. For example, they are unable to fully participate in tourism development, such as home stay operators, because of the lack of skill and poor infrastructure and facilities.

In both islands, women's participation in the formal economic sector comprised only 15.4% out of the 683 working age group (15-64). Almost 85% of these working age women are not involved in the formal economic sector but this does not necessarily mean that they do not contribute towards their family in economic terms. Most typical rural women's primary reason for going to work is not to get something in return, i.e., status and recognition, but to help raise family income (R. Ismail, 2001). This response aligns with the majority opinion that men/husbands should bear the burden of supporting the family.

Many women still spend a large part, or even almost all, of their working lives as non-employed fulltime housewives. The question is should these women be written off as an 'economically inactive' category that has little or no significance for categorising the social positions of households (Miller, 2001)? Serious consideration should be made to develop a category to recognise women's indirect contribution towards their household economies, for example by saving on the cost of hiring domestic helpers and their role in contributing towards ensuring their children's safety and security.

Voices of local women

There are several issues that emerged from the voices of local women, such as their marginality in location, lack of skill and training, the importance of education, the need for a more sustainable income generating activities for women on the islands, and the potential of the Geopark. In general, local voices were heard to express a sense of appreciation of the economic benefits derived from development, mainly better infrastructure and facilities. However, signs of dissatisfaction and vulnerability were also evident in their responses. They noted that local community members are usually not involved or do not participate in the decision making process of development even when these projects affect their livelihoods. Local community shared their concern on the need for alternative socio-economic opportunities, particularly in tourism activities. Currently there are a few local home stay operators on Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting, which indicate their level of exposure to outsiders and interest in participating in tourism development that is taking place mostly on the main island centered in Kuah and Padang Mat Sirat (Halim et al., 2011). Due to its location situated off the main island, investment efforts either by government or private sectors are needed for Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting to revive present economic activities, based on types of skills available from local community. In order for them to benefit and participate in tourism, there is major work to be done not only in terms of infrastructure and facilities but also in education and awareness training for local people, i.e., cleanliness and training in tourism activities.

Underpinning many of the aspirations expressed by the women was the need for a more strategic approach and better planning for enhancing local livelihoods and community development. Many women interviewed indicated a strong desire to participate in income-generating activities to improve their quality of life. Several women whom we met taking a break after completing their daily chores expressed the view that previously there were attempts made by the local authority to encourage cottage industry such as making fish snacks as part of women empowerment activities, but that somehow it was a short lived venture. Although the basic raw material to make the fish snacks are in abundance, such as *kembung* fish, the reasons for the short lived venture was mainly because of a lack of proper training, marketing and guidance to operate cottage industry and monitoring from the local authority to ensure that locals are able to manage the activity. A group of women from Pulau Tuba expressed the view that about 11 years ago there was a handicraft workshop in their village for men and women to make products made of pandanus leaves and coconut shells, but that it does not exist anymore because of poor sales and marketing. The difficulty to sustain and maintain small cottage industry in rural development is not a new challenge. Similar cases may be found in different parts of Malaysia (M. Ismail, 2001; R. Ismail, 2001). Even so, the potential of small cottage industries has provided encouraging results from different experiences in other regions, and have shown that they could be a source of economic and social empowerment for the community (Wilkinson and Pratiwi, 1995; Mitchell and Reid, 2001; Tucker, 2003).

"As a housewife, I make local snacks to sell everyday and take orders for sewing local dresses so that I can support my schooling children", said a respondent who has nine children. This is mostly a common scenario for housewives in the island who contribute to family household income through such activities. "Only education can help to change the fate of our children so that they can lead better lives than ours", said another respondent who encourages her children through family weekly counseling and discussion. This is an indication that parents are becoming more aware and concerned for their children's educational attainment. "Although the overall educational achievement is still low among the locals, there are signs of improvement", members of Parent's and Teacher's Association (PIBG) of Secondary school in Pulau Tuba explained. "We are hoping that the University of Tomorrow that was proposed can bring us some job opportunities for us and create awareness and motivation for our children to work hard in their studies", expressed by a respondent who said she was waiting for development to bring in economic opportunities.

"We heard of Geopark from the local radio (Langkawi FM), although we are not sure what it means, we hope it will bring good opportunities for us", a small food stall owner stated, expressing her enthusiasm and willingness to receive any forms of development that would improve their livelihoods. However, "we are always waiting for some miracle to bring improvements to our village, perhaps Geopark or a university to be placed in our island is what it takes to bring the change", said a local woman who trades her crafts, mostly weaved baskets, to a local handicraft centre in Kuah.

The acknowledgement of Geopark in 2007 is a potential tool to assist in creating innovative socio-economic opportunities in the local community in Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting. Several Geopark-based tourism products such as *Wang Buluh* cave, homestays, and nature trails of *Wang Lebah* have been identified and developed by local agencies. However, it is still too soon to ascertain the impact in terms of socio-economic benefits to the local community, especially in creating more opportunities for women to participate.

Continuous monitoring and impact assessment studies should be carried out to ensure benefits and opportunities are provided for the local community.

The role of micro-credit schemes and corporate social responsibility programmes, such as *Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia* and CIMB Community Link, are one of the ways to help and encourage women entrepreneurs whilst improving their family living conditions. For instance, a group of 18 single mothers in Pulau Tuba had gathered together to organise themselves as entrepreneurs. Although they have skills, they still lack in resources. Thus they approached a local bank in Langkawi for funding to buy capital equipment to expand their businesses, such as sewing machines, ovens, and mixers (CIMB Foundation, 2011). Since they started in 2010, they are now in a better position to provide for their family and children's education as their businesses are growing steadily, improved incomes, and producing more refined products and handicraft in reaching out for wider market. These programmes facilitated by NGO and private companies have provided training, education and financial assistance for women so they would have the skills and confidence to participate in socio-economic activities. It is likely that there are further opportunities for women to participate more actively in improving their livelihoods through such proactive arrangements.

Conclusion

Building capacity to improve women's participation in rural development is an essential component for sustainable community development. The results of this study showed that improvement is needed in encouraging women participation in socio-economic activities. Provision for trainings, skills enhancement and financial assistance programmes are crucial to facilitate women's participation and empowerment. These provisions are even more crucial due to their marginality in location from the main island, thus accessibility and networking are issues to be addressed in enabling women in Pulau Tuba and Pulau Dayang Bunting to participate equitably in community development programmes to ensure better quality of life.

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