Constructs of Economic Participation of Rural Native Men and Women


Abstract

Debates on gender differences revolve around the mutual influence of culture and material realm. How people construct their lives in economic spheres matters in consolidating or reducing gender bias. The agriculture sector is still considered the main economic sector participated by the Bidayuh women. Bidayuh women’s participation in both the service and manufacturing sector is still at the minimum level. The purpose of this article is to understand the trends and the underlying reasons for the differences in employment participation of Bidayuh men and women in a rural area in Sarawak, Malaysia. As it appears, the differences are constructed by the world view or more accurately from the local understanding of the Bidayuh community. Insights were gathered through in-depth interviews with fifty respondents. In addition, opportunity was also taken when it arises to participate in seminars and informal group discussions. This study adopted an interpretivist ontology and an abductive research strategy. The social actors were asked to reveal the concepts that they use in talking about the differences between Bidayuh men’s and women’s employment participation. The abductive research strategy was employed with the task of discovering the concepts and meanings, interpretations, the motives and intentions, which people use in their everyday lives, and which shape their behaviour. In other words, it is vital to immerse into the everyday social world in order to grasp these socially constructed meanings and describe the activities and meanings people use in their everyday live. Analysis shows that there are three reasons for the differences between Bidayuh men and women in employment participation. The three reasons are traditional gender division of labour, employer’s bias, and lack of education, skills and training. In order to protect Bidayuh women against gender based disadvantages in the context of economic participation, it is important to review development policy to make it more gender sensitive.

Key words: abductive research strategy, Bidayuh community, participation.

Introduction

Literature on community studies have highlighted that there are disparity in terms of access to and benefits gained from development not only among ethnic groups but also between genders (Brgeron, 2003; Cranford, 2012; Eneh and Nkamnebe, 2011). Culture, tradition, religion, class and norm are always important elements in development process (Peters, 2009; Schoneveld et al. 2011; Richards, 2005; Toulmin, 2008), with gender playing an influential and stronger role for women (Ginn, 2001; Eneh and Nkamnebe, 2011; Cranford, 2012; Rashidpour et al. 2010). Many studies also have devoted to the problem of status and activities of rural women in the development process, especially in developing countries. For examples the study undertaken by Cranford (2012), Yassin et al. (2011), Agarwal (2010) and Novel et al. (2011) pointed out that in the rural areas, women’s needs and concerns have been neglected and disadvantaged by a combination of their weakened economic positions relative to men.

Studies by Agarwal (2009), Ejembi et al. (2006), Yassin et al. (2011), Ahmed et al. (2011) and Jacka (2006) have also indicated that, gender inequalities have often been manifested by the visible forms of differentiation in terms of economic, political and social relative to men; remuneration to various productive and reproductive activities; opportunities and access to resources; and the differential impact of various development programs on the gender division of labour. Studies from various parts of the world have also shown that the correlation between women’s status and the level and quality of development at national and international level is found to be reciprocal where men and women dependent on each other (Lyndon et al. 2011; OECD, 2010; Sharp et al. 2003). This also means that, the low status of women compared to men affects the overall quality of development and an appropriate and adequate participation of women in development would enhance the status of women (Brgeron, 2003; Rahman and Naoroze, 2007; Chegini, 2010). Limited definitions of development and
inadequate measures of development may generate incorrect or deceptive conclusions about the level and quality of development and quality of women’s integration in development (Panahi and Malekmohammadi, 2008; Mok et al. 2007). Thus, it is important to understand the process of development with some gender perspectives.

Statement Of Problem:

Numerous studies have been carried out on the Bidayuh ethnic. These include works by Mok et al. (2007), D’Silva et al. (2010), Ahmed et al. (2011) and Lyndon et al. (2011) to name but a few. Despite the numerous studies carried out, at present there seems to be little documentation of the national or regional analysis of major issues arising from the trend of Bidayuh ethnic participation in employment especially from the gender perspective. Studies so far have failed to capture the trend of Bidayuh ethnic in employment based on gender disaggregated data where women have always been neglected compared to men in terms of valuing their work. Moreover, there are no clear guidelines for Bidayuh ethnic group as to the extent to which their men and women are integrated into the development process and in defining what role they should play in the process. Furthermore, the population census over the past two decades did not clearly show the breakdown of Bidayuh ethnic by gender in terms of employment. Therefore, it is not surprising that the pattern and trend of Bidayuh ethnic participation in development over the past 20 years are still ambiguous. This poses question as to what extent has the pattern and trend of employment amongst Bidayuh ethnic between men and women changed? This research therefore, tries to examine trend of change of Bidayuh ethnic in development from a gender perspective, and it intends to answer why there are differences in employment participation between Bidayuh men and women? The purpose of this research is to study the participation of Bidayuh people in economic development from a gender perspective. The specific objectives of this study are to explain reasons for the differences between Bidayuh men and women employment participation in the agricultural, service and manufacturing industry.

Research Methodology:

The methodological approaches applied in this study are as follows: (a) design of the study (b) location of the study (c) population and sampling (d) data collection (e) data analysis.

Design Of The Study:

Since the study wants to know why are there differences in employment participation between Bidayuh men and women, qualitative techniques were used in the data collection such as in-depth interviews, field notes and non-participant observations. This is because by employing qualitative approaches, patterns and similarities across cases emerge from the data since in the final analysis what the research is interested in is to understand the process rather than just the product (Iphofen, 2011). This is in accordance to what Harvey (2011) and Doucet and Mauthner (2011) explain that basically qualitative research technique stresses on the importance of setting, context and subjects frame of reference. Iphofen (2011) and Doucet and Mauthner (2008) also describes that qualitative technique comprises detailed descriptions of people and events in natural settings; depth and understanding emerge from recording what people say in their own words and capturing their meaning with carefully worded probe questions.

In this study, individuals who had adequate experience and are knowledgeable about the Bidayuh community provided their own views about the progress of Bidayuh ethnic in development. Besides that their responses towards the differences between Bidayuh men and women in employment participation were sought. The participations were given the freedom to choose the time and place for the interview, so as to provide the most comfortable environment for them to express their views. The places they chose for the interview includes their office and their home. With the interview guide in hand, the researcher listened attentively to the participants as they spoke, and made short notes of interesting facts related to the views being expressed, facial expressions, body movements, and meaningful verbal remarks. The data from the interviews and non-participant observations allowed the researcher to understand the differences of Bidayuh men and women in employment participation as described by the respondents themselves. Typically, findings from qualitative research are in “the form of the themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypothesis and even theories (Mauthner and Doucet, 2008). Since there was little empirical work that provided explanation for the differences in employment participation amongst the Bidayuh men and women, it was one of the reasons for the researcher to conduct the study.
Population And Sampling:

The population for this study was Bidayuh households in the districts of Serian and Bau. Eleven zones were included in this study, which comprises 261 kampungs or villages. The population was derived from eleven zones in the districts of Serian and Bau. The next step involves choosing four zones out of the eleven zones. By random sampling using lottery technique, the zones of Biratak, Krokong, Amo and Tebedu were selected. According to Mauthner and Doucet (2003), the concept of sampling is based on a portion of the population, making observations on this smaller group from which the sample was drawn, and then generalizing the findings to population. The selection of households as informants was based on the location of the households, which was near the main road. For that purpose, a map from the head of the village was used as a guide to locate the households. The District Officers of Serian and Bau were approached to assist in the sampling. A list of villages or kampung and the population of the households from four selected clusters/zones were provided. Other officers such as extension personnel from DBNA and local leaders in the four zones were also contacted in order to have prior knowledge on households’ responsiveness to interviews. Visits were also made to village heads and head of village committee and local leaders such as ‘penghulu’, ‘pemanca’ and ‘temenggung’ to enquire information regarding the number of household family at the village level. The list of the village population was obtained from the District Office of Serian and Bau, and later shown to the Ketua Kampung or heads of the village and local heads to verify whether the list of population is still maintained or are there any changes about the addresses of the population. The sampling was based on their experience, understanding and knowledge about the participation of Bidayuh men and women in employment participation in the three economic sectors namely agricultural, services and manufacturing sectors. All of them have indicated Bidayuh community as experiencing change in socio-economic development over the past 20 years. In this study, the researcher sensed that the data had reached saturation after sixty interviews. Data saturation is referred to as the point where the information one gets from the interviews becomes redundant (Iphofen, 2011). However, in order to be convinced of the researcher’s judgement on their sense of the data, two further interviews were conducted, which subsequently confirmed their position. Therefore, a total of twenty informants took part in this study. For this study, the informants were a Bidayuh community leader, an assistant agriculture officer, a
manager of Kedup palm oil factory, a head master, an administrative officer and an Assistant District Officer. The reason for choosing these respondents was because previous literature shows that these groups of people often serve, or were very close and have dealings with the Bidayuh community in their respective tasks in the development process (Novel et al. 2011; Lyndon et al. 2011; Sivapalan et al. 2011; Ahmed et al. 2011).

Data Collection:

In this study, the data collection entails in-depth interviews with selected informants. In-depth interview provides freedom for participants to express themselves effectively. Furthermore, during interviews, a researcher is able to immerse into another person’s perspective (Harvey, 2011). The interviews were conducted by using an interview guide. Input from previous interviews, comments by colleagues, and recommendations by the committee members became the basis for the refinement of the guide for future interviews. A total of 50 hours of interviews for twenty interviews were taped and later transcribed verbatim, producing nearly 400 pages of transcription. Statements from respondents were identified for clarity. However, the original meanings were retained. This was done through consultation with the committee and peer review. Again, after the categories and sub-categories were developed each transcription was then reviewed several times with the consultation of the research supervisory committee for clarity.

Data Analysis:

The qualitative data was analysed in terms of its contents and themes based on the information derived from the in-depth interviews on the differences between men and women in employment participation, supplemented by field notes from non-participant observations.

Findings And Discussions:

Trend In Employment Participation, 1990-2010:

The data show that the labour force participation of Bidayuh men and women in 1990 and 2000 was highest in the agriculture sector. The majority of both Bidayuh men and women labour forces continued to concentrate in the traditional and labour-intensive farming with relatively low income. Although in the past 20 years the participation of Bidayuh women in higher income sectors have increased rapidly accompanied by their greater participation in the formal workforce like manufacturing sector, Bidayuh women labour forces continued to be marginally represented compared to men in the same sector over the same period. The disparity in employment participation between Bidayuh men and women observed in the 1990 and 2000 census data continue to be observed in the 2010 survey data. This is evident from the difference in the percentage of participation in employment by sector. For example, between years 1990 to year 2010 the labour force participation rate in the manufacturing sector for Bidayuh men was higher than the participation of women. Women’s participation rate was 5.6% in 1990 and rose up to 15.1% in 2000. However, the 2010 survey figure was only 17.5%. While for men the figure for 1990 was from 9.1% and rose up to 22.8% in 2000 and 30.5% in 2010.

However in the agriculture sector the participation rate of Bidayuh women was higher compared to that of their male counterparts. For example, in 2000 the participation for Bidayuh men had decrease from 65.3% to 40.1% in 2000 and 2010. However, for Bidayuh women the figure for 1990 was from 80.1% to 78.1% in 2000 and 70.5% in 2010 survey data. Based on 1990 to 2000 census data a general trend shows a marked increase in the services and manufacturing sector of employment of both Bidayuh men and women and this trend is also observed in 2010 survey data. The economic development process brought about significant structural changes in production and employment of Bidayuh men and women. For example, there seem to be a major shift from the primary to the secondary sector, that is, from the traditional sector of subsistence farming to the modern sector characterized by production of marketable goods. Hence, there has been a rapid increase in manufacturing activities and the growth of resource-based and labour-intensive industries. However for the 2010 survey data there seem to be relatively high participation of Bidayuh men and women employed in the agriculture sector (40.1% and 70.5% respectively). As a result of this, the participation of Bidayuh women in the non-farm/agricultural activities has shown a slight/marginal increase. This shows that the process of industrialization and urbanization has not affected the trend of Bidayuh female labour force participation. A study by Ahmed et al. (2011), Yassin et al. (2011), Agarwal (2010) and Sivapalan et al. (2011) also indicate that even though the participation of women has shifted from a concentration in subsistence rural economy to a greater involvement in the urban industrial sector and the service sector, but the contribution of women to the economy was invisible and not concrete compared with men. Women were progressively confined to the home front as their direct participation in the market economy declined (Novel et al. 2011; Mok et al. 2007). Even though, the economic trend has shifted towards an increase in the “new” and “complementary” services and higher capital-intensive
industries, women workers suffer from the constant possibility of displacement as these capital-intensive industries require less workers thus reducing job opportunities for women, whilst occupational categories within the service sector are casual workers and often underpaid (Pandey, 2002; Rawluk and Godber, 2011; Biggs et al. 2007; Mwangi et al. 2011). It can be concluded that although Bidayuh women are still concentrated in domestic-related occupation on farm, more women are turning to other categories of employment within the service and manufacturing sector. Overall, the trend of Bidayuh men and women in employment participation reflect the general pattern of structural change in the economy. The service sector continues to possess a strong positive association with female employment and economic development. Yet most Bidayuh women are still at the lower rung of the occupational ladder. Even with economic development, the position of Bidayuh women as a whole in the employment sector has not experienced much change. Their employment has improved quantitatively but not qualitatively.

Explaining The Differences In Employment Participation Between Bidayuh Men And Women:

Based on the interview with the twenty informants, the researcher found that the differences between Bidayuh men and women in employment participation could be explained in three main categories and two sub-categories of reasons. The three main categories are traditional gender division of labour, employer’s bias and lack of education, skills and training. The two sub-categories of gender division of labour are women’s personal choice and views towards employment from the husband, parents and societal perspective.

Traditional Gender Division Of Labour:

This theme refers to the traditional gender division of labour that influences personal choice and views toward employment and the participation of Bidayuh women in employment. All of the informants felt that traditional gender division of labour were the main barriers, which hinder the participation of Bidayuh women in employment. For these reasons it is not surprising when the participation of Bidayuh women in employment is still engaged in the agriculture sector compared to men due to traditional gender division of labour that the role of the women should be in the domestic and household duties, which has been the convenient mode in the farm sector. In Bidayuh culture, it has always been considered that a Bidayuh woman’s role is that of a housewife and mother while the man is considered to be the breadwinner. Therefore, Bidayuh women do not need to earn an income whereas men do. Because of this traditional gender based division of labour, few conscious efforts have been made to enable women to seek for positions and to seize opportunities besides those of domestic and maternal nature, as well as confine to farm duties.

Women’s Personal Choice:

Except for two informants, all others felt that the participation of Bidayuh women in employment is very much influenced by the women personal choice. It shows that they are more constrained by the demands of domestic labour and child care, which inhibit them from participating in employment involving inflexible hours, overtime, extensive travel or shift work, given the costs and difficulty of making child care arrangements and the difficulties of leaving children unattended. Therefore, women themselves may choose typical female occupations with low pay and less security and lacking in opportunities for upward mobility. These jobs are often related to perceived female characteristics such as patience, dexterity, caring, docility or to traditionally female activities within the household such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, tending the sick and personal services of various kinds.

James, who felt that the participation of Bidayuh women in employment is greatly influenced by the women themselves, indicate that “for those who have high qualifications they prefer feminine kind of job like teaching and nursing because this kind of jobs could give them greater opportunities to pay more attention to their husbands and children. Most of the Bidayuh women feel that involvement in employment is not part of their responsibility”. Like James, Cecelia also felt that most of the Bidayuh women prefer to choose a job which is suitable to their characteristic as women. This is because this kind of job could give them “flexibility to attend to domestic chores”. Ali also indicated that since the Bidayuh women believed that it is important for them to divert more effort to the growth of their family and the successful relationship with their husbands, therefore it is difficult for them to be involved in technical jobs which require greater commitments. He said: ‘I think if the Bidayuh women still continue with the attitude that it is too difficult for them to participate in employment such as in jobs like engineering and architecture which need a lot of time and concentration’”. Like Andrew, May also felt that since the Bidayuh women felt that she is more constrained by the demand of domestic labour and child care most of them chose to work in jobs that allow them to spend more time on their household duties and domestic demand. Furthermore, the differences in women’s participation in employment is also because the
women themselves prefer to choose jobs that are in harmony to their own characteristics as women. As such, the women could give more efforts and pay more attention to their family.

These findings suggest that the informants felt that the participation of Bidayuh women in employment is very much influenced by the women themselves who prefer to choose jobs suitable for housewives ad mothers. The informants also agree that the demands of domestic labour and child care, which inhibit them from participating in the forms of employment involving inflexible hours, overtime, extensive travel or shift work, and the costs and difficulties of leaving children unattended. Such work demands force the Bidayuh women to decide to choose suitable jobs that can allow them to pay more attention to their husbands and their family.

Studies by Agarwal (2009), Ejembi et al. (2006), Westermann et al. (2005), Smithson and Stokoe (2005), Sharp et al. (2003) and Rahman and Naoroze (2007) also supported this finding which indicates that many women workers working within the confines of the home feel that they have relatively more freedom than those working at the office. This is probably due to their multiple roles as wife, mother and worker.

Views Towards Employment:

The participation of Bidayuh women in employment was not only shaped by their personal choice but also seems to be related to the views of husbands, parent and society towards employment. This views not only affect the opportunity for Bidayuh women to participate in employment but also consolidate their role on household duties and give priority to their children and their husbands rather than to seriously concentrate on seek employment outside their domestic sphere. In other words the negative views of husbands, parents and society about the women’s participation in employment have influenced their lack of participation in the labour force.

The Views Of The Husbands:

The informants felt that the participation of Bidayuh women was influenced by the attitude of the husbands who do not encourage their wives to be involved in technical jobs like engineering and architecture. Most of the Bidayuh husbands want their wives to be involved in the teaching profession and choose suitable jobs so that they can spend more time with them and to educate their children. According to James, Bidayuh women have been forced by their husbands to choose suitable jobs so that they have a lot of time to concentrate on their children. Like James, Cecelia also indicated that most of the Bidayuh husbands did not encourage their wives to be involved in a technical job which requires commitment of time and attentiveness. The demands of domestic labour and child care have also forced the Bidayuh husbands to push their wives to change their jobs which are flexible in nature. Cecelia also added that, “their husbands’ attitude which places full domestic responsibility on their wives has caused their wives to give more attention to the family and children. Some of them have to quit their jobs. This is the scenario that I have seen in my area”. For Kamal, Bidayuh women whose husbands have stronger traditional orientation towards gender based roles were less inclined to help out in domestic works. With the increase in domestic responsibilities of women resulting from the decrease in spouses sharing domestic work, Bidayuh women could not spare more time for economic activities. All these responses of the informants suggest that they felt that the participation of women in employment was influenced by the view from the husbands about the significance and the accessibility of Bidayuh women’s involvement in occupations that are not considered appropriate for women especially those jobs that are dominated by men. Because of this view, most of the husbands have forced their wives to quit their jobs and did not encourage their wives to be involved seriously in technical employment especially in the industrial sector where the working time is not fixed. The informants also agree that the views of the husbands on womens’ employment had influenced substantially women’s lack of participation in employment.

The Views Of The Parents:

Informants also felt that parents’ view also influenced the participation of Bidayuh women in employment. Most of the Bidayuh parents felt that it was not important nor too significant for women to be involved seriously in employment especially in the men dominated jobs. They like their daughters to choose typically female occupations such as teachers, so that they can concentrate and contribute more seriously to their families. Their contribution to the family and the society has been indirectly viewed along the saying, “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”. Most of the Bidayuh parents still assumed that women do not need to work for wages whereas men do. The responsibility of men is to provide for and financially support the family. The role of the women, on the other hand is to be good wives to the husbands and successful mothers to their children. Most of the Bidayuh parents still assumed that women do not need to work for wages whereas men do. Overall the findings suggest that the informants felt that the Bidayuh parents felt it is neither significant nor suitable for Bidayuh women to be involved in employment in the men dominated jobs. The informants agree that the
Bidayuh parents like their daughters to get involved in jobs appropriate for women characteristics, such as being sale assistants, cleaners and general workers.

**The Views Of The Society:**

Some informants felt that the negative views of the society toward women also influence the participation of Bidayuh women in employment especially in the male dominated job. According to Cecelia, the Bidayuh society felt that it is not appropriate and not too suitable for Bidayuh women to be involved in employment. Andrew believed that the participation of Bidayuh women in employment was also influenced by the view of the society toward employment, which felt that “women should stay at home and looking after their children”. Along similar lines, Mary indicated that the Bidayuh society still believed that working in male dominated sector is not important for Bidayuh women. She also added that most Bidayuh’s felt that women should work in jobs that relate with their own affinities and characteristics as women. Overall the informants felt that the stereotypical view of the society towards women’s role has influenced the participation of Bidayuh women in employment. The Bidayuh society felt that it is not appropriate and not important for Bidayuh women to concentrate employment especially in the male dominated jobs. The informants also felt that since the Bidayuh society have constructed stereotypical role of women to be in the domestic sphere, most of the Bidayuh women felt that work outside of the house are not their duties or role but their husbands responsibility. Most of the Bidayuh society still hold the view that it is nice and wonderful if the Bidayuh women choose typically female occupation like teachers and nurses so that they will have time to care for their children.

**Employer’s Bias:**

There are informants that indicated that the participation of Bidayuh women in employment was also influenced by the employer’s biasness. Employers are reluctant to hire women because of their perceived higher rate of absenteeism, higher turnover, lesser human capital endowments and higher costs. Employers also perceive that certain kinds of jobs are deemed inappropriate for women. Along the same line Cecelia also added that most of the employers often hire women for jobs that are considered suitable for women. Like Cecelia, Ali also felt that most employers often hire women workers using criteria that are not applicable to men. Mary added further that she has been informed by her friend about similar experience. Most informants felt that since the Bidayuh women are constrained by the demands of domestic labour and child care, the employers prefer men compared to women because they have less concerns about the attendance, higher rates of absenteeism and higher costs. Studies by Mok et al. (2007), Lyndon et al. (2011) and Bahaman et al. (2011) also noted that in Peninsular Malaysia, employers perceive that male workers are better able to bear the long hours of meticulous, tedious and monotonous work compared to female workers. According to Chegini (2010), Simvised et al. (2008), Ahmed et al. (2011), Rahman and Naoroze (2007) and Lavers (2008) gender consideration were also used by the employers to differentiate supervisors from production workers due to their multiple roles as a wife, mother and worker.

**Lack Of Education, Skills And Training:**

The informants interviewed revealed that the different level of participation of Bidayuh men and women in employment is also related to lack of education, skills and training among Bidayuh women. According to James, lower educational level and less training have caused wives to choose jobs in the agriculture sector where qualifications, job experience and skills are not required. Like James, Andrew also felt that due to lack of education and training, Bidayuh women were found more in agricultural jobs and in lower positions in the industrial sectors, with low wages and low status. Arguing along similar line, Mary also felt that it is too difficult for women to secure higher paying jobs which require some level of skills and education because of their lower educational level, skills and training. To Alice, she believed that the lack of education and skills is the main reason for the differences between Bidayuh men and women in employment participation. Overall the informants felt that since the Bidayuh women have less education and skill, it is very difficult for them to be involved in sectors that require some level of education and skills such as in manufacturing sector. The informants also agree that due to lack of education and skills, Bidayuh women tend to secure jobs in unskilled, manual, or clerical works like being general workers, cleaners and labourers, while Bidayuh men tend to concentrate more in skilled manual positions with higher pay, more secure and higher opportunities for upward mobility.
Conclusion:

Majority of Bidayuh women are still concentrated in agriculture sector with low skill and low paying job compared to men. This implies that with lack education, skills and training, it is difficult for Bidayuh women to perform better and have a good position in employment besides the agriculture sector. In order to protect them against gender-based disadvantages in the context of economic participation, it is important to review existing development policy to make it more gender sensitive. Agencies concerned should create programs to provide support for skill development, for instance, for to get the retrenched Bidayuh women workers back into employment. Also skills improvement for women who are engaged in low level employment, assistance for re-entry of women who have taken time off for childcare, encourage young women to select studies leading to higher-skilled and better-waged jobs through vocational counselling, and provide management training for Bidayuh women at supervisory levels, entrepreneurship development and access to labor market information.

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