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# THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN MALAY FAMILIES IN THE SEMERAH PADI SQUATMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

Women formed half of the Malaysian population (Department of Statistics, 1991). With 48 per cent of them in the working age group of 15-65 years, however, they formed only one third of the labour force. Their labour participation rate was low. For instance, in 1993, their participation rate was 41.9 per cent compared to 83.8 per cent for men (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 1994).

Notwithstanding their low labour participation, the scenerio is changing. Their participation rate had been increasing from 37.2 per cent in 1970 to 45.8 per cent in 1990 and 47.5 per cent in 1995 (*Seventh Malaysia Plan*). Besides, Malaysian women, according to the Second World Conference on Women in Nairobi, were reported to have enjoyed equal pay in most sectors as well as separate tax assessment from that of their husbands. Furthermore, in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, it was reported that Malaysia would be committed to a 30 per cent target for women in decision-making positions in the political, public and private sectors (*New Straits Times*, 26 August, 1996).

However, the majority of women are less active in the labour force compared to men. There are also regional differences. In Sarawak, for example, the participation for women in 1991 was only 37.7 per cent compared to the national rate of 46.9 per cent. More significantly, a recent study found that the labour participation rate for urban squatter women in Kuching was a mere 10.49 per cent (Wee, Jennifer, Rosziati and Sim, 1995).

## OBJECTIVE

This article highlights the findings on the roles of women in the Malay families in the Kampung Semerah Padi squatment. The information is obtained from a study on "Child Nutrition and Gender Roles in Child Care Amongst Urban Squatters in Kuching - the cases of Kampung Semerah Padi,

Kampung Sungai Apong and Kampung Baru Stutong” (Wee, Jennifer, Rosziati and Sim, 1995). It is hoped that this article will contribute to the limited literature on gender relations in Sarawak. The findings in this article may also provide an interesting comparison with similar research on the position of Malay women in other states.

## **BACKGROUND**

The analyses in this article are based on forty-four Malay households with children aged seven years and below. The male was recognised as the head of household. All the male heads of households were married and about three quarters were 25-44 years old. The wives’ age was 29.9 years. The average household size was 5 persons. There were 87 children seven years old and below, with an average of 2.0 children per household. 52 per cent of the children were male and 48 per cent were female.

Over 90 per cent of the couples received education up to lower secondary level (Lower School Certificate), with the husbands slightly better educated than the wives. 11.4 per cent of the husbands had no formal education compared to 25 per cent of the wives. All the husbands except one were employed while only 6 (14 per cent) of the wives were employed. More significantly, 86 per cent of the wives were house workers or what the laymen call “housewives” while none of the husbands was identified as such.

The average household income was RM475.85 per month, with a standard deviation of RM200.89 per month. 65.9 per cent of the households were under the poverty line income (PLI) of RM500. The monthly income ranged from the hardcore poverty line (half the PLI) of RM250 to RM1250 per household. Malnutrition by the weight criterion (World Health Organisation, 1983) was high, with 5.8 per cent of the children severely malnourished and 40.7 per cent moderately malnourished.

## **CHILD CARE**

Keeping an eye on children, which is deemed a 24-hour task, is done by all mothers. This is true particularly when the child starts to explore the environment. The child may climb on furniture to reach out for dangerous objects. Removing all furniture is impossible, especially for the small houses of the squatters under study. Furthermore, removing all objects from the child’s environment may hinder his development.

While the mothers had to undertake the time-consuming task of keeping an eye on children, none of the fathers did so apart from one who only assisted his wife. Many respondents rationalised that the fathers were too busy with paid employment away from home to take care of children. Nevertheless, the fathers could have looked after the children upon return from work. For example, only four of the fathers (9.1 per cent) bathed the children. On the contrary, all the six employed mothers had to look after the children.

## **HOUSEWORK**

Three quarters of the fathers and only one quarter of the mothers did the marketing. The reason was that the market was far away. Hence it was inconvenient for the mothers to undertake the chore. The mothers had to use the public transport or a motorcycle. Ironically, it was the women's inability to use the motorcycle which relieved them of the marketing.

The mothers also prepared food for the whole family (see also the case of Jelebu, Negri Sembilan, 1992 and the National Population and Family Development Board Report, 1991). Food preparation was perceived as the women's responsibility because they were considered the expert. However, this is a myth because women are not born experts in food preparation. The skill has to be learnt and acquired through practice. If women are more skilful, it is because they have been doing the chore. Consequently, there is a need to change such perception. Otherwise women will be forever bonded to the chore by their so-called "expertise". Interestingly, this bondage of women because of their perceived expertise was endorsed by both men and women interviewed in Semerah Padi.

Besides food preparation, the mothers also did the cleaning such as washing utensils and crockery as well as cleaning the house. They also washed clothes for the whole household. On the other hand, cleaning the house compound was considered physically taxing and befitting for men.

The mothers spent an average of 7.68 hours per day on child care and housework, which is the same as, if not more than, that for formal employment outside the house. The average time spent by the fathers was less than one hour per day. Even so the time spent on cleaning the house compound included breaks such as rests or cigarette smoking during the cleaning.

## **DECISION MAKING**

Half of the respondents stated that men decided how household income should be spent. However, this does not imply that half the women had much leeway in controlling the purse-strings. In view of limited disposable income, the bulk of the household expenditure would go to food (consistent with the Engel's law on consumption). Consequently, women's control of the household budget was confined to the decision on the type of food.

Indeed it was generally agreed that the mothers should decide the food they should take during pregnancy and lactation as well as the food for children. Nonetheless, most mothers would refer to medical personnel for advice.

Most couples said that it was not within their power to decide on the number of children. They thought that the number of children was the will of god ("Kuasai Tuhan"). Their belief resulted in low percentage (16 per cent) in family planning practice. The pill method for women was most commonly used. Contraceptive options appeared limited and were directed to women rather than men although the condom, withdrawal and vasectomy could have been used (Malaysia Family Life Survey, 1992 and National Population and Family Development Board, 1992).

## **CONCLUSION**

Men enjoyed higher status than women. For example, men were recognised as the head of the household. The tasks of men and women were delineated. Child care and housework were considered women's responsibility. Being wrongly perceived as experts in child care and housework, women ended up being bonded to these tasks.

Most mothers in Semerah Padi were not formally employed outside the home. Given the prevailing gender perception, these mothers would probably have to continue caring for children and undertaking household chores even if they were formally employed, leading to their double burden as in the case of those who are presently employed outside the home (see also Royston and Armstrong, 1989:63).

The National Women's Policy was formulated in 1989 with the overall objectives "to ensure equitable sharing in the acquisition of resource and information as well as access to opportunities and benefits of development for

both men and women” and “to integrate women in all sectors of national development in line with their abilities and needs in order to improve the quality of life, eradicate poverty, abolish ignorance and illiteracy as well as ensure a peaceful and prosperous nation”. Child care and housework should be equitably shared by both men and women in the spirit of this policy.

A lot of time is required for child care. The provision of child care facilities will allow the mothers to participate in the labour force. Their paid employment will increase their income while their exposure to the working environment will facilitate their personal development and improve their quality of life. Child care facilities may be provided by the government. Alternatively, employers may provide creches for their employees.

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