

## Culture and the Participation of Native in Educational Attainment

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**Abstract: Problem statement:** Culture plays an important role to determine the gender ideologies to define rights and responsibilities and what the appropriate behaviour is for women and men. The objective of this study is to determine the influence of culture in educational attainment of Bidayuh men and women. **Approach:** This study adopts a phenomenology research paradigm that focuses on the lived experience of the community. The differences in educational attainment of Bidayuh men and women were constructed by the world view of the Bidayuh community itself using their own words and experience in daily life. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 50 informants Data were analysed from the understanding of the social actors. These actors reveal the influence of culture that shapes the differences between Bidayuh men and women on educational attainment. **Results:** The finding shows that three aspects of Bidayuh culture such as the stereotypical views on women by parent and society, differential incentive and encouragement influence the participation of Bidayuh men and women in educational attainment. Cultural influence has created obstacles for women in getting education and work opportunities. Parents and societal values still adhere to traditional values where women place in domestic space has negative consequence in women seeking higher level education. **Conclusion:** This implies that cross-cultural learning is necessary in enabling greater need for education attainment among gender groups. Future research should focus more on gender access to wider acquisition of skills that enable them to participate in employment as part of an overall strategy for sustained growth.

**Key words:** Phenomenology paradigm, culture, educational attainment, bidayuh community, cross-cultural, enabling greater, wider acquisition, bidayuh men, research paradigm, gender ideologies

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### INTRODUCTION

Several researchers such as Ahmed *et al.*, (2011), Majee and Hoyt (2011), Bloom *et al.*, (2011) and Phuong (2007) in their study on the development of Southeast Asia countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam revealed that at the macro level structure, most of the issues like cultural, spiritual, organizational and the world view of the local people have always been neglected. This is because the ideas of development are constructed from scientific knowledge which is generated from the knowledge of the West against the knowledge of the local people themselves (Novel *et al.*, 2011). As a result, the ideal type of social scientists or scientific knowledge is likely to differ from the

concepts and meanings used by social actors (Dicks and Pahl, 2011). Culture and tradition are always being parts of an important issue in community development especially among gender (Majee and Hoyt, 2011; Hayrol *et al.*, 2010). This is because culture plays an important role to determine the gender ideologies that define rights and responsibilities and what is appropriate behaviour for women and men. They also influence access to and control over resources and participation in decision-making. These gender ideologies often reinforce male power and the idea of women inferiority (Phuong, 2007; Bloom *et al.*, 2011). Culture is sometimes interpreted narrowly as custom or tradition and assumed to be natural and unchangeable. Despite these assumptions, culture is fluid and enduring. For example the study done by Moktan

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(2010), Majee and Hoyt (2011) and Rashidpour *et al.* (2010) pointed out that in the rural areas, women's needs and concern have been neglected and disadvantaged by a combination of their weakened economic positions relative to men.

In Malaysia's case for example, the development policies employed in the past 30 years successfully reduced the poverty rate from 16.5% in 1990, 8.9% in 1995 and furthermore to 2.8% in 2010 (Novel *et al.*, 2011). However, the poverty rate by gender still differed because women were still considered poorer than men. This scenario saw that the rapid pace of development in Malaysia has given different impacts between men and women in any position. Women have been left out of development far too long compared to men although they make up almost half of the population (Hayrol *et al.*, 2010). The reasons why women tend to be left out of development are traditional gender division of labor, stereotypical views on women, religious attitude, having children, marital status, ethnic influences and/or perhaps prejudices and pure discrimination (Johnston-Anumonwo and Doane, 2011). Majee and Hoyt (2011) and Lavers (2008) specifically indicate that some cultures do discourage or even forbid women from working outside their homes. For example, women in Bangladesh and Africa had not been able to receive the same employment levels compared to men. It could also be the attitude of women themselves, because they feel that men should be the breadwinners and thus, command higher status than women. The presence of children too meant that the vast majority of women have to remain in their homes (Yassin *et al.*, 2010). Against this background, it is imperative to look at deeper insights on the influence of culture in educational attainment of Bidayuh men and women.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Description of study area:** The study was conducted in the districts of Serian, which comprises 261 kampungs or villages. The District of Serian covers an area of 2,040 sq km consisting of 13 zones with a total population of 80,061, of which 40,085 (50.06%) are males and 39,976 (49.9%) are females (Novel *et al.*, 2011). Out of this, only six zones were the Bidayuh areas, namely Tebedu, Ampungan, Amo, Tebakang, Kedup and Bukar. The study area for this research covers two zones, which are Tebedu and Kedup where the poverty program was carried out.

**Research design:** This research adopted phenomenology research paradigm. This is because phenomenology research informs the process of understanding interviewees' commentary (Dicks and Pahl, 2011; Pink, 2011). Furthermore, phenomenology focuses on the lived-through experience of an object or an idea and begins when we interrupt living experience in order to signify it (Pink, 2011). The in-depth interviews with all the informants were conducted in Bidayuh language. Informants in this study were identified using non-probability sampling, with a combination of judgemental or purposive sampling, snowball sampling and theoretical sampling. All of them have indicated that they are experiencing a change in the Bidayuh community in terms of development and their socio-economic status over the past 10 years. In this study, the researcher felt that the data had reached saturation after 30 interviews. Data saturation is referred to as the point where the information one gets from the interview becomes redundant (Harvey, 2011; Iphofen, 2011). As the interviewing was a learning process, the topic discussed will develop as they proceed. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct a second round of interviews with as many of the informants and particularly with those who were interviewed in the early stages. The number of second-round interviews will be determined when theoretical saturation has been reached. Therefore, a total of 50 informants took part in this study.

**Data collection and timing:** Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with the informants over a period of six months. Interviews were conducted by using an interview guide and were tape-recorded. Each interview lasted for about one to two hours, depending on the situation. A total of sixty hours of interviews were taped and later transcribed verbatim, producing two hundred twenty single-spaced typewritten pages of transcription. All interviews were transcribed and formatted for entry in an Nvivo database and used to create categories and to index the data. As the data is in the form of text, so the methods used are concerned with creating categories, indexing or coding documents, sorting data to locate patterns and generating typologies. Statements from informants were identified for clarity. Nevertheless, the original meanings were retained. Again, after the categories and sub-categories were developed, each transcription was then reviewed several times for clarity. Interviews with all the informants were conducted in Bidayuh language.

**Data analysis:** The analysis of qualitative data was done based on the information derived from in-depth interviews focusing on the differences between men and women in educational attainment supported by

field notes from non-participation observation. A sequence of activities was generally carried out during the analysis. The activities were as follows: (i) Transcription of data from recorded interview of each informants was made. It was first written in Bahasa Bidayuh, the native language of the researched population; (ii) the researcher listened to the taped interviews at least twice before having the taped interviews transcribed; (iii) Once transcribed, each transcription was reviewed several times and reorganized to represent a brief explanation on the differences of men and women in educational attainment. This led to the process of cleaning up the data that included making the necessary corrections and excluding any redundancies; (iv) Data were then saved under different file names; (v) To clarify and reduce the influence of researcher's biases, the transcription was then translated to English. A language expert was then consulted to check for its language accuracy. A focus was made to explain the differences between Bidayuh men and women in terms of educational attainment; (vi) The next important step in managing the data was by doing process categories. The researcher developed a matrix table as a means of tabulating the findings into a more organized fashion and (vii) using the themes produced from constant comparative analysis the researcher tabulated particular quotes according to the line numbers that appeared in the script.

## RESULTS

### **Stereotypical views on women towards education:**

Majority of informants in this study indicated that stereotypical views of women were the main reason behind the differences between Bidayuh men and women in educational attainment. According to them, stereotypical views of women in this study can be divided into two types, that is, the view of the parents and the society.

**Parent's views:** The view of parents towards education was based on whether participation of Bidayuh women in educational process was significant. However, parents' stereotypical views of women can be seen as the way it placed concern, appreciation and recognition on the significance of participation of Bidayuh women in educational attainment activities. This stereotypical view does not encourage girls to continue their education beyond primary schooling. Cecelia, who was involved for 20 years in educational profession, made the following remarks on the Bidayuh parents' view of the participation of Bidayuh women compared to that of men in education especially at the higher level:

I have been involved for 20 years in educational profession and I felt that most of Bidayuh parents still did not recognize and think negatively on the participation of Bidayuh female students in education especially at the higher level. You know what is the perception of the parents about their involvement? They said that even though women attain high qualifications, they will still end up in the kitchen. They will not go further with their education and high education is not significant for Bidayuh women. Thus, it is better that women do not go to school because in the end their husbands will support them when they get married.

Andrew disagrees with the parents who do not recognize the participation of Bidayuh women in educational attainment efforts especially at the higher level of learning. He believes that both men and women should have equal opportunities in education to be at same level with other ethnic groups. He said:

I think it was obviously wrong that the parents think that women will not go further with their higher levels of certificates. The parents should think that men and women have to equally compete with other ethnic groups in development. Bidayuh parents have to change their negative perceptions of Bidayuh women and think that Bidayuh women will not go anywhere with their higher levels of learning.

Mary, like other informants also felt that most of the Bidayuh parents nowadays still felt that the participation of Bidayuh women in education is not too useful and not to their advantage at all because when they get married they will end up in the kitchen. They have to be responsible for their husbands rather than practice or make use of the education they have to actively involve in employment. She said:

In my area for example, some of the Bidayuh families are not serious in educating their daughters compared to educating their sons. Their perception is that no matter how high the education of women, their life will be in the kitchen and they will be responsible to their husbands rather than use their level of education to be involved in employment.

On the same point, Deli thinks that perception of Bidayuh parents on women not recognizing the importance of their education had influenced their presence status of education. He had this to say:

Even though I am a farmer, I still remember that some of my Bidayuh friends still have

wrong perceptions about participation of women in education. The saying like 'no matter how high the education a women has, she will still go back to do household chores and in the end she will follow her husband,' was a common perception to Bidayuh women in educational programs because they were less supported and recognized that what was being perceived to Bidayuh men.

**Society's views:** Majority of the informants felt that society's stereotypical views on women regarding careers and education have also prevented an active participation of Bidayuh women in educational efforts. This is because Bidayuh society does not give opportunities or improvement to their women. Most of them pass negative comments and sometimes do not appreciate the participation of Bidayuh women to pursue higher education compared to men. The society will respect and recognize Bidayuh sons with good academic achievement but not the daughters. The above view was strongly felt by James:

Based on my own experience as a Bidayuh community leader, I felt that Bidayuh society in my area prefers to show off their boys rather than their daughters. For example, if their daughters pass with good results they will say that she is not going anywhere with it. Some of the individuals in the Bidayuh communities also felt that it is not significant for Bidayuh women to study at the higher level of learning because it was not too useful compared to their men. Most of them felt that it did not make much economic sense for women to study higher such as at the university level, because when they get married they would follow their husbands and some of them would decide to quit their job.

Another informants, Julie, who also echoed the same view:

I think, one of the reasons why Bidayuh society thinks that it is not too significant for Bidayuh women to study at the higher level of learning is that once they get married they will follow their husbands in the end, rather than help their parents in terms of financial support, compared to Bidayuh men who always marry late. I feel that in the lower level of learning like primary school and secondary school the scenario is not as serious compared to that at the higher level of learning

Along similar lines, Alice who described herself as an experienced person and knows well about her own society and culture, also indicated that she did not know, why the Bidayuh society had negative feelings towards the participation of Bidayuh women in education. She said:

I don't know why this sort of thing happens. The society was not too concerned about the participation of Bidayuh women in educational attainment efforts. Even when some of the Bidayuh women get good results in national examination, they feel that there are no point of Bidayuh women getting this type of results.

**Incentive and encouragement:** Majority of the informants feel that Bidayuh families give less incentive towards participating women in the pursuit of higher education compared to men. Most of the informants agreed that incentive here refers to investment made in the form of financial and material support in the form of facilities from educational institutions. They spoke strongly about the fact that women receive less incentive from the family compared to men. Parents are less keen to support educational undertakings for their daughters. They believe that after spending so much on education, women may get married and they would leave to their husband's families. And this means that they could not make use of their education to bring economic benefits for the parents. Because of this, it is not surprising why the access of Bidayuh women for better education especially at the tertiary level is still lower than the men. This was strongly felt by Andrew who said that:

Based on my experience, I feel that Bidayuh women had received less financial support compared to men especially for higher learning. Most of Bidayuh parents prefer to make more financial investments to men especially on educational facilities like computers and transportation because they feel men have a higher potential for bringing in benefit then women. Since women have been receiving less financial support than men, it is not surprising when most of them had no or lack access to higher education.

Like Andrew, Cecelia also agreed that less financial support from the parents has influenced the degree of participation among Bidayuh women in educational attainment programmes. For Cecelia the unsatisfactory level of participation among women is less obvious in the primary and secondary schools but it

is too extensive compared to the higher levels of learning. She said:

I think it occurs also at the primary and secondary schools, but it not too extensive compared to the higher level of learning where Bidayuh parents prefer to spend more financial support to men compared to women. Even here, there are still Bidayuh parents especially in the rural areas, which prefer to investments greatly on their sons compared to their daughters. The attitude of perceiving greater benefits to be gained from investment made on men compared to that made on women still prevails among the Bidayuh parents.

### DISCUSSION

Cultural influence has led to the difficulties for women in getting education and work opportunities. Parents and societal values still adhere to traditional and patriarchal values of women place in domestic space has negative consequence in women seeking higher level education. Providing education to women is not considered economical by their parents and the society. The illiteracy level among Bidayuh women is still relatively higher than that of Bidayuh men. There warrants structural changes in these communities through greater integration into mainstream development discourse through diffusion of communication and urbanization process, where information and cross-cultural changes will have moderating effects. Although women do have access to higher education, parents and community leaders should play a role in enabling their children to avoid entering stereotypical course as well as stereotypical occupational categories. Educational institutions and media can play a role in opening spaces for equal gender participation amongst the native population.

### CONCLUSION

Stereotypical views on women from the perspective of parents' and the society, as well as incentive and encouragement were crucial in influencing the participation of Bidayuh women in educational attainment at District of Serian, Sarawak. This implies that cross-cultural learning is necessary in enabling greater need for education among native population. Future research should focus more on gender access to wider acquisition of skills that enable them to participate in employment as part of an overall strategy for sustained growth in rural areas and urban employment ventures.

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