

Strong and resilient

Women's capacity for entrepreneurship calls for more opportunities in alternative livelihoods to be made available for women in the coastal villages of Kuching, Sarawak

By **Aazani Mujahid** (maazani@unimas.my), Senior Lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and Malaysia's representative to the Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries, and Food Security (CTI-CFF) Women Leaders Forum, Malaysia

Coastal research in Sarawak, Malaysia, typically, does not target gender. Some projects have added gender-segregated data, but gender studies in fisheries generally remain unfunded. Given the difficulty of obtaining funding, gender scoping studies and needs analyses are rare. As a result, most women working in fisheries remain unidentified and unrecorded. In local culture, men's presence overpowers that of women. Many women marry young and bear children while still in their teens. There is even a case of a woman becoming a great grandmother at age 60.

In my research, I have focused on two coastal kampungs (villages) close to the state capital, Kuching. I found that, despite their subordinate social status, women in these villages were entrepreneurial on the domestic front, not only in fish processing and fish trading and selling but also in fishing. More than half of those surveyed had no formal education beyond the mandatory ages. However, these are resilient women – along a one kilometre stretch in one village, more than 20 women ran food businesses, including fisheries products, everyday snacks and durian products from 100-year-old durian trees. However, the women's businesses were dependent on middlemen for price and market information, and often the products were traded

through these intermediaries by the women's husbands as well.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted women's businesses. For example, half of the women in one village have had to reduce the time they can spend on their businesses by half. As a result, their incomes too have plummeted by half. However, living in transgenerational houses granted the families resilience through financial buffers and additional fishing labour created when some family members returned from working on farms or daily wage jobs.

What can be done to improve the women's opportunities in accessing economic resources for business or stable employment? For a start, the schooling for girls could be extended, giving them a better education base and building their knowledge and skills for later business success. Women's work must be included in laws, regulations and practical measures such as health and reproductive care. Currently, women's work is ignored. Women urgently need to be represented in the local economy, becoming partners in co-creating innovative solutions addressing socio-economic and environmental issues. In short, women and the community need to be at the heart, not the periphery, when engaging with local cultures, customs and the economy. ❏

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Co-organising a village clean-up as part of village community efforts towards environmental sustainability. Women urgently need to be represented in the local economy, becoming partners in co-creating innovative solutions addressing socio-economic and environmental issues

Asia/ Malaysia**A step forward***Women fishworkers find representation in PIFWA***By P Balan, Adviser to the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA)**

Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA) has moved a step forward by establishing a women's bureau in its committee. This will allow a woman representative to be present in organizational meetings where decisions on activities and directions of PIFWA are taken.

Previously, women participated alongside their husband and families in projects like mangrove replanting and workshops organized by the Association. Now, PIFWA's action to include a women's representative in its committee means that women will play a bigger role in future activities.

On 20 May 2002, a meeting between PIFWA and a group of women from the fishing community took place in Sungai Chenaam, Penang. These comprised fisherwomen and women involved in the fishing industry. In the meeting, the women welcomed the decision to have a women's representative and they elected one candidate for the post.

The meeting also discussed problems faced by women especially regarding micro credit: the problems faced in paying back loans especially when fish prices fluctuated or when weather conditions made it hazardous for small boats to venture out at sea, depriving them of their source of livelihood. PIFWA has promised to look into their problems.

In the meantime, PIFWA is also seeking partnerships among local and international organizations for projects for women in the fishing community. PIFWA welcomes suggestions and recommendations.

P Balan can be contacted at pifwa@hotmail.com

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The power of knowledge

Men, women and children of fishing communities in Malaysia come together to learn about drug addiction and HIV/AIDS

By P Balan, Advisor/Coordinator of the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA)

In the tranquil village of Batu Kawan, the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA) brought together inshore fishermen, youth, children and women for a workshop on HIV/AIDS and Drug Abuse. PIFWA invited distinguished speakers from the State Health Department, the National Drug Agency and the Police Department to speak to the group on these two social issues. Even the woman representative from the state assembly of the area was present to lend her support to the workshop.

The workshop provided a good opportunity for fishermen and their families to learn more about these two issues. In some fishing villages the incidence of drug addiction among fishermen is quite high, and authorities conduct frequent raids to arrest drug traffickers and drug addicts. Wives and children are negatively affected when their husbands and fathers become involved in such activities. The workshop also strove to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS among the fishing community—women, youth and children. The possibility of contracting this deadly disease is real considering the use of injected drugs and the low level of education in the community.

Women—mostly wives of fishermen—contract HIV/AIDS as a consequence of the sexual escapades or drug habits of their men and are then shunned by society. It was definitely a turning point in PIFWA's activity when the women, with their husbands and children, came to learn about HIV/AIDS and drug abuse.

It is hoped that this workshop will be a turning point in their lives enabling them to take control of their health and their families. By giving these women the power of knowledge, it is hoped that they will be empowered to speak out against the negative activities taking place within their communities. It is well established that women in fishing villages have always had a strong family and community tradition. Their active involvement on any issue could certainly make a difference.

Asia/ Malaysia

Learning from each other

Fishworkers from Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA), Malaysia learned a lot from a recent workshop organized in the Trang province of Thailand

By P Balan, Adviser to PIFWA

Members of Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA), Malaysia, have just come back from a workshop *In the Hands of the Fishers* organized by Yadfon Association in Trang, Thailand with the support of Mangrove Action Project (MAP). The workshop was held from 6 to 9 November 2000 with the participation of fishworkers from Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Six fishworkers from PIFWA attended the workshop.

The workshop objectives were:

- to allow fisherfolk from the region to share ideas and experiences about efforts to stop destructive fishing methods that threaten the livelihood of inshore fishing communities;
- to share experience in the form of case studies of co-management or community-based coastal resources management;
- to present ideas for alternative sustainable livelihoods that could be adapted by groups or individuals to suit the needs of a fishing community;
- to form a network amongst groups in the region to exchange knowledge, skills and support for sustainable management of coastal resources.

Clearly, where women's involvement is concerned, we have learned a lot from the workshop. For example, during our field visit to the villages of Ban Laem Makhham and Ban Toh Ban, we were shown how women's groups have been empowered through the setting up of handicraft centers for generating extra income. The income from the handicraft center enables women to earn a living from a renewable resource, within the fishing village thus keeping the social fabric of the family and society intact.

We were also informed of the many uses of the *nipah* palm, a plant found in abundance even in our own area, Penang. The *nipah* palm is a wetland plant that can be harvested for its leaves, bark and roots.

We foresee a possibility of using the *nipah* palm as a way to help improve the living standard of the women of fishing communities in Penang and we are currently active in pursuing this matter.

The exposure we received from the successful organization of women of fishing communities in Trang, Thailand has motivated us to implement a similar programme here in Penang. We will keep you informed of our latest activities.

For the World Fisheries Day, we organized a mangrove replanting activity in Sungai Chenaam, Seberang Perai Selatan and Penang. Part of the mangrove has already been cleared to make way for shrimp farming by agencies of the State and the private sector. Since healthy mangroves are crucial to a healthy stock of marine resources, and, therefore, to the livelihood of fishworkers, the replanting activity was well-received and supported not only by the men but also the women of the fishing village.

(P Balan can be contacted at pifwa@hotmail.com)