

The Performance of Entrepreneurships Skills among Belawai Women in Sarawak, Malaysia through Collective Actions

By

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Introduction

This paper reveals the womens' socio-economic activities in the Belawai fishing village, located at the coastal areas of Sarawak, Malaysia. Based on an anthropological study, this paper examines the characteristics and nature of their entrepreneur skills through collective action, which has influenced the success of their businesses. Their success is also influenced by their creativity, strong character and perseverance attitude of the women in managing their small-scale businesses activities, together with their relentless search for markets and multiple strategies to expand their marketing targets, most interestingly done without assistance from the men. Interestingly many of their business products are also based from primary raw materials from their own environment, which in a way guarantees the sustainability of output products produced by the women, especially the production of *sesar unjur* (smoked shrimp).

Women, Entrepreneurship and Collective Action

There is no doubt that female entrepreneurs are increasingly prominent as employers, suppliers and competitors in global market but the research and the dissemination of information about female entrepreneurship are not in parallel with the impact these women and their enterprises have had on the economy (Greene, et.al, 2003). The first academic paper on women's entrepreneurship was only published in 1976 in the *Journal of Contemporary Business* (Greene, 2003). Based on the combination of exploratory and descriptive research, Schwart (1976) revealed that there were few differences in the personal attributes of male and female entrepreneurs). Research on the performance of entrepreneurial skills between men and women-owned businesses found that women-owned firms had "higher odds of discontinuing, fewer resources at start-up and were launched on a smaller scale" (Williams and Reynolds, 1997). Self-efficacy seems to be the reason for women's choice of smaller retail and traditional businesses rather than those in non-traditional business. Women in traditional businesses are claimed to be having higher venture efficacy for opportunity recognition and higher career expectations of life balance and security and placed more importance on the financial support received from others (Anna, Chandler, Jansen and Mero, 2000). There has also been a change in the pattern of women's participation in economic development in Malaysia. Traditionally, women used to be involved in the agricultural sectors, but the proportion has declined from 40 percent in 1970 to 30 percent in 1995 (Ahmad, 1998). The number is expected to decline further, with rapid absorption of women into the manufacturing and the services sector.

Collective action has numerous different definitions, depending on the aspects emphasized by the study. However, collective action is usually related to joint action by a group of community for the common benefits of the participants. Marshall (1988) defines collective action as action taken by a group (either directly or on its behalf through an organization) in pursuit of member's perceived shared interests. Meinzein-Dick et al, (2004) define collective action as "the involvement of a group of people, requiring shared interest within the group, involving some kind of common action which works in pursuit of that shared interest and is voluntary. The collective action can work formal or informally. In the case of Belawai women – both. Other related concept to collective action is agency and social capital. The success of a collective action groups depends on the role and charismatic leadership of its leader, as well as the seriousness and commitment of the formal agencies involved. In this case, the collective action group of the Belawai women is also attributed to the strong leaderships of a few dominant women involved in the programmes. At the same time, the Belawai Fishermen's Association (BFA) and Malaysian Fishery Development Authority (LKIM) are both fully committed working towards enhancing the livelihoods of the communities in the areas, regardless of gender.

Social capital is also related to collective action. Pretty (2001) described social capital as related to relations of trust, reciprocity and exchanges, common rules, norms and sanctions, and connectedness, networks and groups. There are basically two types of social capital horizontal ties among a group (bonding social capital) and vertical ties between different groups (bridging social capital) (Ostrom, 1999). In the case of the Belawai women, the social capital is both of the bridging and bonding type. Bridging in a way that the relationship can be heterogenous, focusing on work and networking, especially searching for markets of their products. It can also be bonding, more domestically oriented organisation that is informal, in the case of other socio-cultural activities, mainly for the local communities and care activities, such as "*hadrah*" (a form of traditional singing performance, influenced by the Islamic-Arab culture, usually performed in festivities especially wedding).

Research Setting

Belawai village is under Mukah district, one of the newest administration districts in Sarawak at one of the tributaries of Rejang River facing the South China sea. Historically, the town was one of the important outposts of the Sultanate of Brunei but now it is famous as the center of Melanau culture, one of the ethnic groups in Sarawak and also the major fishing area. The coastal village of Belawai is only accessible by air or boat where one can take 3 hours boat ride from Sibu through the Rejang River, the longest and most extensive river system in Malaysia to get to Tanjong Manis, widely known as an anchorage point for loading of logs and timber products for export since the early 1940's. From there, another 30 minutes journey by private cab or van will bring us to the coastal village of Belawai which is home to different ethnic groups including Malay, Chinese, Muslim Iban and the largest is Melanau (98 percent of the population). Its total land area is 3,730 acres and its population is about 3,155. About three quarter of its population is engaged in fishing and agricultural industries while the rests are self-

employed businessmen, civil servant and factory workers, mainly at saw mills. Since the local economy is mainly based on fishing, Belawai village is famously known with its marine based products particularly smoked fish and shrimp.

Malaysian Fishery Development Authority (LKIM) and Fishermen's Wives Association (KUNITA): The Organisation Structure

The Belawai Fishermen's Association (BFA) is under the control of the Malaysian Fishery Development Authority (LKIM), which consisted of 6 areas including Belawai village. In 2003, there are 756 members of BFA where Belawai has the largest members, 395. BFA is considered to be one of the most productive Fishermen Associations in Sarawak recording 94,801.71 kg of fish landing in 2003 with the value of RM348,130.06 (PNK profile, 2003). With the aim to diversify its sources of income, BFA has involved in several businesses such as ice factory plant, fish marketing, kitchen gas, diesel and petrol distributors. Other fishing related downstream activities are also carried out, some seasonally in according to the catch seasons, such as fish crackers, dried fish, dried squid, and smoked shrimp and fish. Recently, the BFA, LKIM and the local tourism office are planning to develop Belawai village as an agro-tourism destination. Several potential products have been identified for agro-tourism attraction such as sport fishing, natural attraction such as the Belawai beaches, homestay, grilled fish center, songket weaving center and annual festival such as Kaul festival (sea appeasing festival) and Belawai festival. Owing to its active involvement in various businesses, BFA has won several awards at the state and national level, which among them are Best Fishermen's Association for the first, second and third place at the national level from 1998 and 3 years in a row from 2002.

For Belawai people, BFA is viewed not only as a vital government agency that becomes the mobiliser to local economic activity but it also plays a role in strengthening the social solidarity and bonding between villagers in the community. Solidarity among the village is also equally attributed by the active role played by the Fishermen's Wives Association (KUNITA), which has become the backbone to the development of BFA and also a catalyst to the development of entrepreneurship activities among Belawai women. KUNITA, which is of the same level as BFA, is an organization established by LKIM to increase the socio-economic status of fishing families, together with strengthening the institution of fishing communities. Members are encouraged to venture into small-scale businesses particularly based on marine products. The Belawai KUNITA was established in 1993 with the total members of 195 in 2003. Various kinds of businesses have been ventured by the KUNITA members which among them are marine-based products such as fish balls and fishcakes, fish crackers and non-marine products such as the processing of yellow noodle, tofu, traditional cakes, bean sprout and tailoring. By only paying RM25 as registration fee and RM3 fee annually, members are accessible to various courses and trainings organized by LKIM and Fisheries Department to expose and enhance their skills which is essential as a starting point to venture into entrepreneurial activities. KUNITA is not only focusing on economic activities but also actively involved in socio-cultural activities where the group is often invited either to perform at wedding ceremony or as volunteer group to entertain guests at special functions at the village.

“Getting Together”: Performing Entrepreneurial Activities by Belawai Women

The sense of entrepreneurship has long been cultivated or instilled in the Belawai community due to their traditional life that is based on fishing and agricultural activities. In the past, exchanging of forest products among villagers was a common practice. Today, since the village is far from the town centre, selling their agricultural product to their fellow villagers is a typical activity in the village. Today, this sense of entrepreneurship has been expanded into a more formal setting or organisation such as KUNITA. KUNITA organization has become an example of how collective action is being emphasized in the local entrepreneurial activities. KUNITA is so well organized that most of their business ideas can easily be implemented. The way the organization is being structured has helped the members in setting up sub-committees that are responsible in running its four core businesses, which include KUNITA cafe, yellow-noodle processing, traditional dried cakes and tayloring. Each of these projects has its own committee group. For example, KUNITA café' has one committee that is responsible for the running of the café. This committee group is divided into 3 sub-committees. Each group selects its own leader, secretary, treasurer and ordinary members working based on weekly rotation schedule. Although, structurally the group is based on hierarchy system but in reality, each of the members has an equal authority or decision-making power. This can be reflected through the division of labour that is very much based on collective action where there is no specific task for them. Anyone can perform different task by being the chef, dishwasher, waitress to cashier. Every end of the month, 10 percent of the earning will be contributed to KUNITA fund while the rest will be divided equally among the committee members. Similar to KUNITA café, there is also committee group for yellow-noodle processing, which consists of 4 groups that is also work based on weekly rotation schedule. Every morning, as early as 6 am, a group of KUNITA women will gather at the processing center to start the process of making yellow noodle. Most of the product will be marketed to the local shops, school canteen and households, while KUNITA café is the regular customer of this product.

The above illustration shows that these different committees create “positive” competitive environment, which motivate them to work collectively in performing their entrepreneurial skills. The committee is not only functioned as motivator but also as a medium for them to share their problems or exchange ideas about their business experiences. Although, they may be engaging in different business but each of the committees are very much connected as they work collectively to achieve their goal in enhancing individual socio-economic status as well as to provide sustainable fund to the organization. Another good example of this collective action in Belawai entrepreneurship activities is through the making of smoked shrimp (*sesar unjur*), a traditional and most expensive product of all the smoked shrimp produced in Sarawak, only made and sold by the Belawai villagers.

The making of *Sesar Unjur* (Smoked Shrimp)

In the rural sectors, division of labour has always been clearly marked, in a way that men collect the raw materials, while women processed them, such as weaving mats is

naturally the work of the women but collecting rattan as raw materials are harvested by men. Of course, this might not necessarily be true, especially when men are absent from the village, migrating elsewhere for jobs or if the women are single. This study also reveals the stark division of labour between men and women in the production of *sesar unjur*, whereby men go to the sea to catch shrimp, while women process the shrimp. The process of making this smoked shrimp is a representation of a communal activity and very much based on collective action, whereby children and the elderly are also involved in the process by helping to peel the shrimps and arrange them on the square bamboo board called *kelak*. In Belawai, almost all households, either under KUNITA or individually processed the *sesar unjur*.

Belawai's smoked shrimp is considered to be the most "authentic" because it is made purely from special shrimp called red shrimp and instead of roasting method, the shrimp will be arranged on a square "board" made from bamboo and the board will then be placed slantingly beside the fire. Another aspect that determines the good quality of Belawai smoked shrimp is the usage of mangrove tree as firewood as this will produce a special aroma that makes the shrimps tastier. Although, the women were paid for their involvement but they claimed that it was not so much about the money but the enjoyment of doing it together. Indirectly, this activity gives the opportunity to enhance bonding between them. The process is based on reciprocal, whereby all groups help each other in the processing activities. Every group will join to help the other member of the group doing the same activity. However, the participation does not involve every stage of the process. The processing of smoked shrimp involved different stages, which includes boiling of shrimp, skin peeling, smoking, drying and packaging. However, only two stages of this process are done in a group, the skin peeling and arrangement of shrimps on the board. All these processes are normally done in the compound of the host's house. As the host and owner of the business, she will invite several local women, especially her nearest neighbours and relatives together with their children to help her in those two activities. Firstly, the host will take fresh shrimp from the local fisherman, usually between 30 – 70 kilogrammes of shrimps for every session. Seventy kilogrammes of raw shrimps can produce around 7 kilogrammes of smoked shrimp (one tenth of the whole shrimp). For a 60 kilogrammes of shrimps, it will take a group of 13 members to finish in one and a half hours. The delicate and intricate process of making this *sesar* and its small end-products quantity explains the expensive price of *sesar unjur*.

The shrimp will then be boiled for two minutes so that the skin is easier to peel which also involves the removal of the shrimp's head and tail. This is the most enjoyable experience of the whole process because it involves the entire family and neighbours from different age groups ranging from 8 to 60 years old. Children are the most excited as they will be paid for every kilo of shrimps that has been peeled, usually 50 cents for every kilogramme and manage to get RM5 per session. The delicate process of *sesar* making is *menelat* that is to arrange the peeled shrimp side by side on the square board (called *kelak*). This exercise needs a lot of patience and skills because only the skilled person can make the shrimp stick to the bamboo board. The next process will be the smoking, whereby all these *kelak* will be placed slantingly around the main fire. This will take the longest time, about 4 hours. The final stage of this process is the packaging. The dried

sesar unjur will be packed in a plastic bag and for every 5 kilogrammes package will be sold between RM50 to 55 and usually the price varies depending on the location of the market, such as Tanjung Manis and Sarikei. For example, the same 5 kilogrammes package is sold for RM300 in Sibul, about 3 hours boat drive from the village.

The above description demonstrates that business and entrepreneurship skills of the Belawai women are being shaped through their involvement in KUNITA. One of the important factors that help in developing the Belawai women's sense of entrepreneurship is through the practice instilled by the micro-credit scheme termed as the *Amanah Iktihar Malaysia* (AIM) where most of these women are members to this scheme. AIM is the oldest micro-finance institution in Malaysia and one of the largest Grameen bank replications in Asia. Since its establishment in 1987, AIM provided micro-credit financing to about 69,000 poor families with interest-free loans of RM300 million provided by the government (Distribution Section, EPU, 2002). For the Belawai women, AIM has opened a new route for local women to the world of entrepreneurship that has gradually improved their status of income.

Conclusion

Collective actions can change and improve the livelihoods of a rural community, as represented by the Belawai village. This is demonstrated by KUNITA and the individual households processing smoked shrimp. KUNITA's socio-economic and socio-cultural activities are based on formal collective actions, guided and managed by LKIM. Smoked shrimp processing is based on both formal (KUNITA) and informal collective actions (individual households). KUNITA's active participation in small-scale businesses has boosted up the Belawai women status in the community where their creativity, potential and intelligence are recognized not only by the local men but also those in the fishing industry. This is evidenced when one of the KUNITA members has been selected as one of the Executive Board Members of local Fishermen's Association. This study is a testimony that women, if given a proper guidance and emphasizing the element of collective action, can become a significant contributor in upgrading their socio-economic status, utilizing their environmental products in a sustainable manner and finally strengthening the social structure of their own community.

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