

Intangible Factors Influencing Gender Differences in Educational Attainment Using an Abductive Research Strategy

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Abstract: Many kinds of factors shape gender inequalities in native societies. Some of the most crucial factors are intangible and therefore difficult to measure. Qualitative investigations such as the abductive research strategies help to overcome this difficulty. An abductive research approach penetrates into the social actors' contexts to provide valuable insights into the worldview and indigenous knowledge of a particular native community. This paper deciphers intangible factors that influence gender differences in the educational attainment of Bidayuh native men and women using an abductive research design. Insights were gathered through in-depth interviews with 50 respondents. The qualitative data were analysed based on the narrative themes. The findings showed that Bidayuh women had lower educational attainment than men because of cultural and historical factors that shaped gender differences. The cultural factors were negative stereotypes, lack of recognition, greater emphasis on productive roles of men, financial disincentives and lack of moral support. Alongside, historical colonial conditions reinforced women's position in the domestic space. In conclusion, the importance of culture and historical conditioning in shaping gender differences in the educational attainment of natives cannot be over-emphasised. This means that policy makers should pay premium attention to local cultural and historical conditions of native communities in formulating policies for the educational empowerment of native women. Future studies should address the micro-interaction between cultural and historical factors in shaping gendered educational attainment, for which abductive research can provide the methodological tool.

Key words: Abductive Research Strategy • Bidayuh Community • Educational Attainment • Culture Historical

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequalities have often led to visible forms of differentiation in terms of economic, political and social position of women relative to men [1-3]. Studies have also shown reciprocal relationships between women's status and the quality of development at national and international levels [4-5]. This means that the enhancement of development entails the educational empowerment of women [6-7].

Development had incurred gender discrimination and inequalities. In the case of Malaysia, 30 years of development had successfully halved the poverty rate from 16.5 percent in 1990 to 8.9 percent in 1995 [8] and 5.1 percent in 2005 [9]. Yet Malaysian women were still poorer than Malaysian men. This shows that the rapid growth of development in Malaysia impacted the sexes differently, across all levels of class.

The literature abounds with studies that seek to account for the reasons of the neglect of women in development. The typical reasons identified are traditional gender division of labor and occupational orientation, stereotyped perception and views on women, religious attitudes and orientation towards women's roles, reproductive function and child-care, marital status, ethnic influences, prejudices and discrimination [10 - 13]. Some cultures and ideologies were found to discourage or even forbid women from working in public arena [14-15]. In any case, the presence of children means the domestication of a vast majority of women [16-17].

A number of the several studies reveal that there is a gendered disparity in Malaysian education [18-19]. Yet, officially, Malaysia does not discriminate against women in extending their education [7]. Thus, obstructions to the women's educational empowerment may be found in such

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factors as social norms and cultural values. These are twofold. First, providing education to young girls is not considered economical by the guardians as they are expected to live with their in-laws after marriage. Second, the widespread belief, especially in the rural areas, in the male dominated society where women are there to perform only household duties. It is not surprising, therefore, that in conformity with the cultural expectation, women are socialised into studying Arts and Education and consequently find themselves in the lower service and manufacturing rungs of the occupational ladder. By contrast, male students are encouraged to take on professional courses such as engineering and architecture that enjoy better remunerations and status [20-26].

One vital thing about these studies and findings of the influence of cultural and social factors on women's educational empowerment is that there were mostly outsiders' interpretations. Rarely were there studies that seek to decipher the subjects' own positing and interpretation of their situation. This paper aims to bridge this gap through an introspective study of the native Bidayuh community.

Methodology

Description of Study Area: The Malaysian Bidayuh community mainly lives in the Kuching and Samarahan Divisions of Sarawak, which comprises the districts of Bau, Lundu, Siburan, Penrisen, Padawan and Serian. These areas are commonly known as the Bidayuh place of origin or *Bidayuh Belt*. 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 [27]. The majority of the population in this district according to ethnic group are Bidayuh (49,117 or 61.4%), followed by Iban (12,147 or 15.2%) Chinese (10,204 or 12.8%) and Malay (9,519 or 11.9%) [27]. Out of this, only six zones were Bidayuh areas, namely Tebedu, Ampungan, Amo, Tebakang, Kedup and Bukar. The study area for this research covers the two zones, which are Tebedu and Kedup where a poverty eradication programme was carried out.

Research Design: This research utilized the abductive research strategy that entailed the construction of theories grounded in everyday activities and in the language and meaning of the Bidayuh natives as the social authors themselves. It is based on idealist ontology and the epistemology of constructionism. To apprehend and understand the native communities' underlying

motives and values in so far as gendered educational empowerment concerned them, the abductive approach as proposed by Blaikie [28], Schutz [29] and Giddens [30] was adopted. This is because it allows for the native worldview of everyday life to be introspected (Box 1).

Box 1: Abduction as a research strategy

Abduction is a term signifying the type of reasoning we do when we are aiming toward the resolution of meaning. It is best understood in contrast with the two other more commonly accepted modes of reasoning -- deduction and induction.

Let us start with a simple syllogism. Suppose we know for a fact that all the beans in the yellow sack on our table are white. We then reach into the sack and retrieve a handful of beans. We know, even before we look at them, that these beans will be white. This is an example of deductive reasoning.

Now let us have the yellow sack on the table, but we don't know anything about it except that it is filled with beans. We reach in and pull out a handful of white beans. We reach in again and pull out another handful of white beans. We do this same act 35 times and each time we get a handful of white beans. By now, we are willing to entertain the hypothesis that all the beans in the yellow sack are white. This is an example of inductive reasoning. These two modes of reasoning are quite familiar to us all.

We move on to a more unusual scenario. This time, suppose we have been told that a yellow sack of beans has been placed on our table. We enter the room and find the sack on the table as expected. But we find something else that we did not expect. There, beside the sack, is a small red bowl filled with white beans. In summary, we were expecting the sack, but not the red bowl. Where did this red bowl come from? And why is it filled with white beans?

Our instinct is to reconcile the meaning of the presence of the red bowl filled with white beans as logically as possible. We cannot deduce or induce any conclusions, however. We need a third form of reasoning, which is called abduction.

The nature of the abductive inference is quite simple. We start with some surprising fact (in this case, the red bowl filled with white beans). We then seek to find some explanation that will render our surprising fact into an ordinary occurrence. In this case, we might suppose that the yellow sack was not big enough to hold the entire delivery of white beans and that the delivery people put the excess beans into the red bowl. But why a red bowl? Well, maybe just because it was handy.

The scope of abductive inferences is quite broad. In fact, there are six primary "meaning tools" that abductive inferences can use: hunches, omens, metaphors, clues, patterns and explanations. Abduction has been mostly restricted to the exploration of "reasoning to the best explanation".

Source: Adapted from Shank and Gleber, 2001 [31]

Data Collection: In this research, in-depth interviews using purposive sampling [32] was carried out on Bidayuh men and women, who were involved in poverty eradication programme in the Tebedu and Kedup zone in Serian District. The sampling was based on their experience, understanding and knowledge of the educational attainment of Bidayuh men and about employment participation in the three economic sectors of agriculture, service and manufacturing.

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with the respondents over a period of six months, focusing on the informant's perception of self, life and experience and expressed in his/her own words [33-34]. Each interview lasted for about one to two hours, depending on the situation. Interviews were transcribed and used to create categories for indexing or coding. Data were sorted to locate patterns and generate typologies. After the categories and sub-categories were developed, each transcription was then reviewed several times for clarity with the original meanings retained. Interviews with all the respondents were conducted in Bidayuh language.

In this study, the data reached saturation after fifty interviews. Data saturation refers to the point where the information becomes redundant as the same patterns are seen repeatedly from one interview to another. As part and parcel of the introspection process, it was necessary to conduct a second round of interviews with many of the respondents. The number of second-round interviews was determined when theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when no new categories emerged.

The average age of participants was 45 as of 2008. Most were married with at least four children. All of them received secondary school education. To reiterate, their selection was based on their experience, understanding and knowledge about the life of Bidayuh community and their participation in any of the development projects or processes in the country. In order to protect the confidentiality of the group, each participant was assigned a fictitious name.

Data Analysis: The analysis of qualitative data was carried out based on the narratives obtained from in-depth interviews focusing on the differences between men and women in educational attainment. Additional field notes from non-participant observation were also obtained. A sequence of activities carried out during the analysis were as follows: (i) data was transcribed from recorded interview of each respondent, written in *Bahasa Bidayuh*, the native language of the researched participants; (ii) the taped interviews were reviewed and examined at least twice before they were transcribed; (iii) each transcription was reviewed several times and reorganized to provide brief explanation on the categories of differences of men and women in educational attainment; (iv) each transcription underwent a data cleaning process which entailed making the necessary corrections and discarding any redundancies; (v) the transcription was then translated into English in order to clarify and reduce the influence of the researcher's biases; (vi) categories were constructed to fit the transcription data into a more organized matrix; (vii) the categories and matrix were subjected to further comparative analysis to establish the salient themes; and (viii) particular quotes were tabulated according to the line numbers that appear in the script.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Influence: The majority of the respondents felt that culture was the main reason for the differences between Bidayuh men and women in educational attainment. Three cultural aspects were found to influence the participation of Bidayuh women in education; parents views on women, societal view on women and incentive and/or encouragement. They formed barriers to Bidayuh women in pursuing and choosing educational paths.

Parental Views on Women: Majority of respondents in this study indicated that stereotypical views of women were the main reason behind the differences between Bidayuh men and women in educational attainment. This stereotyped view does not encourage girls to continue their education beyond primary schooling. Parents perceived that once women got married, they would end up in home making and being supported by their husbands. As such women did not have to acquire higher levels of education. A farmer perceives that "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". Another elder person, Thomas, opined:

- Look, I am a fair and honest person. I am a Bidayuh and I know very well about the issue on regarding the differences between Bidayuh men and women in my community concerning educational attainment. Generally, the issue is more on about the perception of Bidayuh parents on the career prospects of Bidayuh men and women in education. Most of the Bidayuh parents felt that the career of women will end when they get married. The parents say what do you do then with good education.

However there were dissenting voices within the community, who seek to advocate social learning process by comparing the Bidayuh with other ethnic communities whose women have made advancement in education. Andrew disagrees with parents who did not recognize the pursue of higher education by Bidayuh women. He believed that both men and women should have equal opportunities in education so as to be on par with other ethnic groups. Andrew's excerpts are as follows:

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

Social learning from other ethnic groups which advanced women's educational attainment provided a glimmer of hope for the Bidayuh community.

Society's Views: The Bidayuh society shared the stereotyped view of parents, but differed in the emphasis given on economic utility where women were out-rightly perceived as non-productive. This negative economic view formed the underlying reason for prohibiting women's advancing in education. On the contrary, the society recognised and respected Bidayuh sons with good academic achievement. As one male community leader said:

- Bidayuh society in my area prefers to show off their boys rather than daughters. For example, if their daughter pass with good results they will say that she is not going anywhere with it.

The above view was supported by Anne, a female villager:

- The Bidayuh society did not recognize women pursuing higher learning. When some of the Bidayuh women got good results in PMR and SPM, the society shows little respect as compared to when Bidayuh men achieved the same result. There is no point for women to go for further studies.

There were views which suggested that the issue at hand was only about women pursuing tertiary education and not lower and secondary education. This view was raised by a local leader who said:

- I think the perception of my Bidayuh community about the participation of Bidayuh women in the primary and secondary schools is not too serious. In the higher level of learning of course the perception is bad. The Bidayuh society does not recognize and felt that it was not too useful for Bidayuh women to pursue higher studies compared to men.

One common thread in the rationale for discouraging women's higher educational attainment was the utility of education for women as compared to men given that the priority of the productive role was male-centric. This view was asserted by the community leader who said:

- Some of the individuals in the Bidayuh communities also felt that it was not important for Bidayuh women to go for higher studies 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 at a higher level such as at the university, because when they get married they would follow their husbands and some of them would decide to quit their job.

Thus men needed higher education to secure better jobs more than women in order to support their parents financially. It was boys' instead of girls' functional roles in production that were recognized.

Incentives: The majority of the respondents felt that Bidayuh families gave less incentives to women in pursuing higher education as compared to men. Financial incentives and material support for educating male children as far as they can go were seen as worthwhile investments. The same was not considered true for the female children. This was expressed by Philip who said:

- I think it occurs also at the primary and secondary schools, but it is not too extensive compared to the higher level of learning where Bidayuh parents prefer to spend more financial support to for male compared to female children.

The attitude was propelled by the perception that greater benefit will be gained from such discrimination of investment.

As women received less financial support from parents, it was inevitable that most of them stopped pursuing higher education. Beside the lack of financial incentive, women also lacked moral and social incentive to embark on higher education. This view was aptly put by Josephine who said:

- To succeed in education a Bidayuh woman needs to build the capacity for self-employment, self-reliance and self-confidence. When a daughter has a problem in her study, not many Bidayuh parents share their time and give moral support such as encouragement, incentives, advice and getting feedback as they do to their sons.

Historical Influence: Most of the respondents agreed that Bidayuh women had for many decades been overlooked and given less opportunity to gain access to higher education. Some analysts like Jayum [35] attributed this lukewarm attitude towards women's education to the colonial administration. The Bidayuh community, which is one the native groups in Sarawak, had been long marginalized by the Brookes, a group of British colonials who administered the state before the country gained independence in 1963. This historical neglect is depicted by Anne as follows:

- I said so because in the 1970s and 80s, the opportunities for women were little if we compare to those open to men. Since the Bidayuh women have been long neglected, I think it could affect the had adversely affected their attitude and effort towards in seriously pursuing higher education instead of farming and gathering. I also feel that it is unfair to compare Bidayuh women's educational attainment with that of men especially with respect to the types of courses they followed in universities and other institutions of higher learning.

The reason for the women's continued neglect in of seeking higher education had also been attributed to the domestic chores expected of girls as compared to boys. It would take time for signs of change to appear as observed by Elizabeth in the following excerpt:

- In the past 10 years, the Bidayuh family had always been a tight unit of production and consumption. In the Bidayuh family young women have to take care of her brothers and sisters. Furthermore, they have to process and prepare food, clean the house and do the family laundry. During this time most Bidayuh girls had to drop out of school and took over their mother's job. This did not apply to boys. Therefore, it is not surprising that Bidayuh women's educational achievement is always lower than that of men. The women have been neglected for far too long. I don't think within a short period the level of participation by Bidayuh women could compete with that of men. It would take a lot of time.

History, through the initial colonial conditioning had made educational attainment less attractive for Bidayuh women.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the Bidayuh experience that culture and historical conditioning do play a critical role in engendering educational differences in native societies. This is a truth that policy makers should take into account in formulating educational empowerment plans for native women. It points to the desirability that such empowerment programmes adopt a bottom-up approach whereby they can be best contextualized according to the native situation.

The implication for future studies is that they should address the micro interaction between cultural and historical factors in shaping educational attainment, of which the abductive research can provide the methodological tool. As for local native community organizations, concerted effort should be made to especially encourage more native women to pursue higher education. Finally, native communities should engage government institutions to be more proactive in turning around all cultural biases and historical neglect that had led to the educational relegation of native women.

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