

WOMEN WORKERS, MIGRATION AND FAMILY IN SARAWAK

HEW Cheng Sim

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In many parts of southeast Asia women's lifestyles are going through enormous changes as women move from traditional rural, agricultural lifestyles to modern, urban lifestyles, which often involve migration to cities, taking on paid work, and having quite different relationships with their families.

This book – based on intensive research among the women of the Bidayuh people in Sarawak, all of them first generation migrant wage workers – explores the extent to which women's lifestyles are changing, and the reasons which prompt women to make the changes. The women's specific life choices in migration, wage work and marriage are discussed in the context of wider socio-economic transformation.

The author's research includes detailed interviews in the field, and much of this interview material is included in the book, thereby enabling the Bidayuh women to tell their own stories as they grapple with the rapid changes swirling around them.

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Preface

When I first arrived in Sarawak almost two decades ago, the urban population constituted a mere twenty per cent of the state's population. I remember telling my visitors that if they wanted to sample how life is like for the majority of people in Sarawak, they would have to leave the urban centres and travel upriver to the interior bazaars and villages. Twenty years later, half of Sarawak's population resides in the urban centres and the population of Kuching, the capital, has doubled. Hotels, restaurants and shopping centers have mushroomed and the once unheard of traffic congestion is now part and parcel of everyday life in the capital.

Like the rural migrants in this study, my own research interest has also moved from the rural to the urban which has become the epicentre of transformative forces. History is being made as village girls are transformed into urban wage earning daughters and later into employed wives and full-time home-makers. In documenting the women's experiences, I hope to shine a torch not only on their encounters with waged work in a genderised and ethnicised sector of employment, but also explore the implications that wage earning has on their positions in their households and their relationships with men. Although this investigation has resonance of similar work in the region, a review of other studies have alerted me to the enormous variations in women's relationship to paid work, marriage and family. Hence, women's experiences of rapid economic and social changes are by no means prescribed and are historically and contextually specific.

In doing this study, I had to grapple with a myriad of issues concerning my own hybridisation. First, as a researcher whose social location is in the East but whose intellectual training was in the West, I found that nothing in the field fitted neatly into familiar pre-packaged concepts. On the contrary, they needed unpacking as what I confronted was ambivalent, ambiguous, contradictory and messy – just as life always is. Second, although my research question was sociological in nature, my research methodology was located in anthropology. Although these are not impermeable boundaries, it made the task more challenging. Third, the political issue of 'insider/outsider' knowledge is a concern as my own state of origin is in West Malaysia and Sarawak is my adopted state. Given state and federal politics between West Malaysia and Sarawak, I am considered an insider, outside of Malaysia and an outsider, in Sarawak. In constantly straddling two

locations intellectually and culturally, I had to come to terms with my own position *vis à vis* the women that I study.

In writing this book, I am indebted to the women who participated in this research, for their willingness to share their lives with me. In addition, a big thank you goes to my supervisor, Belinda Probert and my examiners, Janet Salaff and Martha Macintyre for encouraging me to publish this book. Without their encouragement and useful feed-back, this book will not be written. Financial support for my doctoral studies came from University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) but moral support at UNIMAS for publishing this book came from Abdul Rashid Abdullah, Michael Leigh and Wan Zawawi Ibrahim. I am also grateful to Beverley Cox for her editing and word-processing skills in getting the manuscript into shape for the publishers. My appreciation goes to Peter Sowden of RoutledgeCurzon for narrowing the geographical distance between Sarawak and England with his efficient handling of this project. Last but not least, special thanks goes to Tang Tieng Swee for taking the photographs and the map which he reproduced for this book.



The location of Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia

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1 Introduction

This is a study of Bidayuh women working in the personal services sector in the city of Kuching in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. The Bidayuh are a minority indigenous group in Sarawak and they constitute 8.1 per cent of the state's population after the Iban, Chinese and Malay in that order of population size. The Bidayuh live mainly in and around Kuching and the majority are farmers practising mixed agriculture. They grow rice for subsistence and various combinations of cash crops like pepper, cocoa and rubber, depending on global market prices. As a result of the great fluctuations in world market prices for these products, the Bidayuh are increasingly turning to market gardening; growing vegetables, mainly as secondary crops on their paddy farms, for the markets of Kuching. However, many of the younger generation with some secondary education are shunning the hard life of their parents who live off the land. With a buoyant economy until recently, many have been drawn to seek wage work in Kuching and beyond. It is with the Bidayuh women who have left the villages for the city that this study is concerned.

Kuching is the capital and administrative centre for the state and has a population of close to 400,000, which makes it the largest city in Sarawak. It is essentially a civil service city and has a relatively small industrial base in comparison to the majority of the cities in West Malaysia. Many Bidayuh women now work in the personal services sector, as waitresses and kitchen aides in restaurants and coffee-shops, petrol pump attendants, assistants in nurseries and private child-care centres, supermarket assistants, cleaners in small local hotels and domestic workers. I consider their work in the personal services as employment in the formal sector (as opposed to the informal sector) because they have employers, fixed monthly wages and to a certain extent, clearly defined days off. The main reason for studying women in this sector of work is because very little is known about them. Unlike their factory sisters who have been propelled onto the international feminist stage,¹ Malaysian women working in the personal services sector are a largely forgotten and neglected lot. Their employment and workplace practices are localised, not globalised, and they do not congregate visibly in transnational worksites. Their experiences of the labour process at the bottom of the service work hierarchy are non-sensational because the nature of their work is viewed as a continuation of women's unpaid domestic labour and is

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menial and lowly paid.² It is because of their lowly position in the work hierarchy that I have used the term 'wage work' throughout the book although in the West, wages are usually paid weekly while the majority of the women receive their pay monthly and in some cases, bimonthly.

This book also redresses an imbalance in studies of women in the Malaysian context. As observed by Stivens, a scholar with a long association with Malaysia,

... the concentration on factory labour, to the exclusion of the many other forms of manual labour that contemporary Malaysian women perform, is clear evidence of the power within Malaysian social science of 'workerist' models deriving from the western experience.

(Stivens 1996: 166)

However, it is only fair to say that the manufacturing sector employs the largest number of women in Malaysia overall, although there is an increasing proportion of women involved in the tertiary sector. In 1996, community, social and personal services ranked second after manufacturing as a sector with the largest percentage of women employed (Cheng 1999: 219). In addition, Stivens pointed out that there has been a disproportionate number of studies of Malay women and much less work on other minority women in Malaysia (1992: 215). She suggested that Malay cultural hegemony amongst social science academics and government affirmative policies for the Malays have led to a lot more research on Malay women than on women of other ethnic communities.

This study of Bidayuh women is a first in Sarawak because of its urban employment context. Even as these women confront the present in an urban setting, they draw upon their past. Previous anthropological work on the Bidayuh which investigated different aspects of their lives in the rural areas³ will be invaluable to an understanding of Bidayuh history and way of life in the hinterland. Although these studies will not be individually reviewed here, they will be referred to wherever relevant in the book.

This study focuses on Bidayuh women because they are rural migrants and first generation women in their households to have migrated to the city for wage work. The women's migration to the city will be examined and contextualised within the macrostructural forces at work and their individual motivations for migration. Apart from wanting to know what migration to the city means to the women, I am interested to know how wage earning in the capitalist economy has affected their relationships with men and how this is different from their mothers in the village. This research question follows a long tradition of studies by feminists and historians (Whitelegg *et al.* 1982, Tilly and Scott 1987, Secombe 1993, Frader and Rose 1996) who have been interested in the consequences of such structural transformation on the lives of women. They studied the link between women's wage work and their family life in the nineteenth century where industrial capitalism changed the economic and social landscape of the West.

Women, wage work and the household

Women

The category of women needs deconstructing as there is no such homogenous, universal category. One example is that women at different phases in the life-course⁴ will have different options in their labour-force participation and work trajectory and also in their relationships to their households and men. An approach which contextualises their experiences at different phases of the life-course sharpens our understanding of the linkages between wage work and household and the constraints and opportunities that women face. Hence, I have selected to study single women, working mothers (this includes married women and single mothers) and housewives who have since withdrawn from the work-force. Using women's position in the life-course as an axis of analysis does not imply that women at the same phase in the life-course would necessarily share the same experiences or perceptions. However, we need an approach which articulates both the diversity and commonality of women's experiences.

An interesting study using this framework is one by Pratt and Hanson (1993) which examined the employment patterns of various groups of women over the life-course in Massachusetts, USA. They explored the differences between younger married women, middle-aged married women and those divorced, separated and widowed. They linked domestic responsibilities to their labour force participation and looked at the way in which women with domestic responsibilities were constrained spatially by the local labour markets.

Lamphere *et al.*'s (1993) study of sunbelt working mothers, set in Albuquerque in the United States and involving Mexican-American and Anglo women workers is another investigation of the relationship between gender, class, ethnicity and marital status in terms of women's experiences in reconciling family and factory work. The book focused on the contradictions that working mothers faced in mediating their commitment to wage work, housework and child-care. It looked at both convergences and divergences in the strategies used by women of the two ethnic groups in resolving the tensions between wage labour and domestic labour and how they built supportive networks.

Although my own work will not examine the geographical dimensions of the women's entry into the labour market, the work of Pratt and Hanson and Lamphere is nevertheless relevant as I investigate how women at different phases of their life-course mediate the terrain of wage work and domestic responsibilities.

Wage work

The connection between wage work and women's emancipatory project has always been of concern to feminist researchers. According to Engels, women's subordination to men was a result of the development of the monogamous family as an autonomous unit of economic production. This change in family form was linked to the private ownership of the means of production. Men wanted to

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transmit their accumulated wealth to their genetic offspring and monogamous marriage assured them of the paternity of the children. Women were therefore relegated to reproductive tasks of feeding, washing, cleaning and biological reproduction within the domestic sphere while men were primarily responsible for economic production in the public sphere. In this way, men appropriated women's domestic labour and women did not control access to resources and the products of their labour.

Within the framework of binary theorising which dominated feminist debates in the 1970s, a line was drawn between productive and reproductive work, public and private, modern and traditional, autonomy and dependence. Hence, as the agrarian economy changed to a capitalist mode of production and peasants were proletarianised, it was at first postulated that women's participation in productive labour outside the home would be crucial to their emancipation from the confines of family and their economic dependence on men. Consequently in the West, women's participation rates in the labour market are often used as indices for their status. However, the forms that autonomy and status take in the Third World may be very different from those in the First World. For instance, in certain parts of India where it is a dishonour to work outside the home amongst unrelated males, women's status and autonomy may come from their ability to abstain from waged labour (Sharma 1990: 241). In addition, concepts of autonomy and status are difficult to operationalise in the field. For instance, how are they to be identified and how are they to be measured? These concepts are therefore highly problematic. The debates have moved on since then and the links between women, wage work and the household are now seen to be more complex, multilayered and shifting.

Since the 1980s there has been an explosion of scholarly work on women in developing countries, especially in Asia. This is particularly so as globalisation and the international division of labour transformed the lives of women in these newly industrialising countries. Questions have been asked as to whether the exploitative nature of capitalist production had negative consequences for these women or had wage-earning increased their independence and autonomy (Nash and Fernandez 1983, Pearson and Elson 1984). The assumption implicit in a lot of studies was that there was a direct link between women's participation in the work-force and their status and autonomy as pointed out above. In Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea and later Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and most recently, China, international capital investments in labour-intensive processes in electronics, garment and other light industries drew young single women from the villages to towns and cities for the first time. Lee's work on factory daughters in the new export production zones of Shenzhen, South China found exploitative relations between village girls and their employers (Lee 1998). With clientalist relations between local state officials and foreign investors, the formation of trade unions was lax and strikes were opposed. Thus, young women workers were subjected to punitive, coercive control by management which Lee labelled localistic depotism (*ibid*: 109–36). Women from the different provinces in China were channelled into factories in Shenzhen and

male locals controlled female locals on the factory floor. Salaff's (1995) work on factory daughters in Hong Kong,⁵ Kung's (1983) study of Taiwanese factory girls and Lim's (1983) contribution to the understanding of the situation of factory women in Singapore, argued that there was exploitation of women not only by international capital but also by the state and family.

Both Salaff and Kung discussed the power of the Chinese patriarchal family in controlling the wages of their factory daughters. Although Salaff's factory women lived at home and Kung's women stayed in factory dormitories, their conclusions were very similar. Women's contribution to family coffers did not empower them or expand their life-chances. Instead, their wages were often used to educate younger siblings and especially brothers. Sons continued the family line while daughters married and left home. Thus, daughters in Chinese families were perceived to be economically valuable only for a short period of time between leaving school and marriage. However, their economic contributions to the household were seen as part and parcel of filial piety and a repayment of a debt to the family. Hence, their wage-earning did not increase their standing in the family or give them a greater say in family decision-making. Although working daughters enjoyed a certain measure of freedom of mobility, leisure activities with their peers and consumption patterns unavailable to their mothers, they were nevertheless subordinated to the family and capital. Similarly, Lim (1983) documented the burden of domestic responsibilities on Singapore women working in electronic factories and the discrimination they faced as workers and their secondary status both in the economy and the family. Thus, these studies indicated that patriarchal relations at home limited women's potential even as they participated in the work-force. Contrary to these studies, Lee found that women did not seek factory work in Shenzhen because of their families' dependence on their remittances. On the contrary, some rural parents supported their daughters when they were unemployed and between jobs and did not rely on their daughters' luck in getting jobs (Lee 1998: 75). The young women's main motivation for migration was to escape parental control and family obligations and to explore a new way of life in the city (*ibid*: 81). Remittance was not necessarily for familial use but as a way of keeping their hard-earned money in secure hands. Thus, the workings of the Chinese patriarchal family find different expressions in different contexts and at different times.

In Indonesia, Wolf (1992) studied Javanese factory daughters and found that the less restrictive family structure in Java meant that daughters often worked in factories against their parents' wishes and did so not for familial economic reasons but for new experiences. In fact, peasant families often had to subsidise their daughters' meagre wages by sending food to factory dormitories or providing them with free housing if they lived at home. Unlike the factory daughters of Taiwan and Hong Kong who gave their families a substantial portion of their earnings, Javanese daughters earned much less and could only manage small luxuries for their families. Wolf also discussed how Javanese conceptions of femininity were manipulated in order to control women's labour.