

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

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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