

## The Shrinking Paddy Farms and the Bidayuh Women Rice Farmers: What Has/Have Changed?

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### ABSTRACT

This article critically evaluates factor(s) contributing to the declining rice farms, cultivation, and production among the Bidayuh communities. This is especially with women's roles in rice production or cultivation within this unique ethnic group of Sarawak. The qualitative methods were the key approach for this research. As it is understandable that qualitative methods are effective at capturing issues that are sometimes immeasurable, and factual in determining the aims and objectives of a specific study. This is possible as qualitative methods are very elaborate and in-depth. The core findings of this research are the understanding that feminization of agriculture especially with rice production has become an impediment to the cultivation of rice in these areas. This is understandable as more women acquired formal education, they migrate to urban areas hundred folds in search of work leaving behind farms and farming especially the production of rice in their region.

Keywords: *Bidayuh, farmers, feminization of agriculture, paddy farm, women*

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### INTRODUCTION

“Rural women and girls as vulnerable victims of their circumstances, and obscure the nature and the magnitude of their potential” (FAO, 2021).

This paper examines factors that enhance the decline in rice farms, farming and production among the Bidayuh of Serian, Sarawak, and the contribution of women to rice cultivation in the region. Women play a very significant role in every society, essentially in food production and security. They are the backbone of the rural economy, especially in developing countries. According to research by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), on average, about 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries are women. What is more, about 79% of these women largely depend on agriculture as their primary source of income (FAO,

2009). In essence, women are of vital importance to rural economies. Rearing poultry and small livestock and growing food crops and vegetables, they are responsible for some 60% to 80% of food production in developing societies and countries. According to FAO (2009), in many farming communities, women are the main custodians of knowledge on crop varieties and the selection and preservation of seeds. For example, in some regions of Sub-Sahara Africa, women may cultivate as many as 120 different plants alongside the cash crops managed by men. In developing countries in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, women typically work 12 to 13 hours per week more than men; yet women's contributions are often 'invisible' and unpaid (FAO, 2009).

Women's involvement in food production and security is not a new phenomenon. This is because, from the onset of human civilization, women have participated in farming activities. Often, employing traditional knowledge or new technologies, and world view to sustain their livelihoods, protect the community's food bank, and, at the same time, preserve the biodiversity of their respective areas. Likewise, over the centuries, Bidayuh women have continued cultivating the land. Hence, the success stories of the past Bidayuh rice harvest will never be completed without the roles and activities of their womenfolk. However, today, a journey along many Bidayuh villages and farms have shown that rice farms are either being replaced with cash crops or increasingly shrinking in size and production level<sup>1</sup>.

Yet, a step back in time reveals a completely different scenario of rice production among the Bidayuh communities. For example, according to a member of the community, in the 1970s and 1980s, rice cultivation or paddy farms in these communities were in 100 folds or plots of land. One of the elders described it as *rantau*, meaning rice farms that stretched as long as eyes can see and were owned by many families. The harvest was bountiful then. The locals described it as *kurit*. According to the elder, this is because the people will go home joyfully with many *guni* bags as possible. Unfortunately, today this level of production or harvest is no longer attainable. Nowadays these farms are outgrown by heavy bushes, rubber, oil palm plantations, and sometimes, patches of pepper farms. Indeed, rice farm production is dwindling at an alarming rate. Ironically, the state and federal governments are strongly advocating for an increase in agricultural production and input. It is these inexplicable differences in rice cultivation and production that provoked the following research questions: what are the social factor(s) affecting rice production among Bidayuh communities? How vital is the role of Bidayuh women in rice production in their community?

## BACKGROUND

Sarawak is diverse in nature, ethnicity, and religion. Although this region has witnessed varying outside migrations, the majority of those inhabiting this unique land are its indigenous people. Their uniqueness is depicted in their customs, arts, foods, and lifestyle. The Minority Rights Groups International (2017) states that Sarawak has a population of almost 2.5 million, made up of some 26 different ethnic groups. The non-Muslim indigenous groups are collectively called Dayaks. One of the prominent ethnic groups of Sarawak is the Bidayuh.

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, rice cultivation in other parts of Sarawak or Malaysia is not much different. According to the Malaysian Star online of 15 March 2016, Malaysia is still heavily reliant on imports to feed her population, despite efforts to be more self-sustainable. According to the Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Minister, Datuk Seri Ahmad Shabery Cheek, "Malaysia's food import bill was RM45.39bil last year" (Carvalho, 2016). The article continues, "In the same year, our food export was only RM27bil, so the efforts to reduce the RM18bil deficit are a huge responsibility for the Government". Unfortunately, a holistic discourse on the state of rice cultivation in Malaysia as a whole is outside the scope of this article.