GENDER, POVERTY AND FISHING COMMUNITIES IN MALAYSIA

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In discussing gender issues, the topic of poverty inevitably arises. Men are perceived as tough and hardworking and in control of their environment whereas women are caring, nurturing and expected to be there for children as well as extending their caring role beyond the home. Fishing activities are perceived as only for men. Will a household with more men be at greater risk of poverty if they are injured or not able to work? Will a household with more women also suffer poverty because they may not be able to do fishing related activities? This paper used part of the data collected in 2007 from three Malaysian districts with among the lowest rates of poverty. Household income data were collected only from those households involved in open sea fishing or aquaculture activities. A list of poor or hardcore poor households was obtained from the Malaysia Department of Social Welfare. The findings showed an average of eight persons in each household, with an equal distribution between males and females. For each household, the gender ratios were calculated. Households were then categorized as (1) many-male-households with gender ratios of > 0.5 (distinctly more males than females in the household), or (2) less-male-households for gender ratios ≤ 0.5 (equal or fewer males than females in the household). A similar method was use to calculate the gender ratio for female family members for category (3) many-female households, more females than males in the household, and (4) less-females for equal or fewer females than males in the household. Thus categories 1 and 4 differ only by the number of household with equal numbers of members of each gender and like 2 and 3. For poverty categories, the first category was the poor and hardcore poor able-body category for households with members who are all able to work. The second category was for households with at least one of its members being a single mother, or an elderly, handicapped or person suffering from a serious illness (not-able-bodied). The Chi Square statistics between the two groups of poverty and four groups of gender ratios were significantly associated ($p \leq 0.05$). A high percentage of many-male-households (66%) were in the not-able-body category as well as a high percentage (79%) of less-female-households. For the households in the able-body poverty category, the majority (71%) were less-male-households using the male focus, whereas percentages were equal for more-female-household and less-female-households. These findings suggest that a fishing household with many female members may suffer of poverty even though all of the family members are able to work. These findings may support the impression that fishing activities are masculine activities. For example if there are many males in a family, most of them will get involved in fishing activities and the family will be at the risk of poverty if one of these male are somehow handicapped. However, if there are many females in the household, the household may also be at risk of poverty because fishing activities are too masculine for them. These findings suggest that collaboration between male and female family members of developing downstream activities to empower female folk in fishing communities such as food processing for fish-based product.