

Roles of Progressive Malaysian Farmers in Rural Development: A Gender Analysis

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Keywords: men and women progressive farmers, gender studies, local change agents

ABSTRAK

Kajian bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti ciri-ciri penting petani maju lelaki dan wanita, serta menganalisis peranan yang mereka laksanakan dalam pembangunan luar bandar. Data diperolehi dari tiga belas pemenang pertama anugerah "Peladang Jaya Kebangsaan" dari tahun 1981 hingga 1992 dengan menemubual mereka. Kajian mendapati petani maju lelaki dan wanita mempunyai ciri yang sama dari segi umur dan saiz tanah yang dimiliki. Mereka berbeza dari segi taraf persekolahan, saiz keluarga dan bilangan institusi sosial yang dianggotai sebagai pemimpin. Kajian juga mendapati bahawa petani maju lelaki dan wanita mempunyai pelbagai peranan dalam pembangunan luar bandar selain daripada peningkatan produktiviti pertanian seperti penglibatan dalam perniagaan tani dan perniagaan bukan pertanian, kepimpinan dalam pembangunan institusi sosial, kebijakan dalam masyarakat dan peranan sebagai agen perubahan tempatan.

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses characteristics of men and women progressive farmers and examine their roles in Malaysian rural development. Data were gathered from thirteen male and female winners of the "Farmer of the Year" national award, from 1981 to 1992, using indepth interviews. Male and female progressive farmers have similar characteristics in terms of age and land acreage owned. They differ in terms of educational attainment, family size, and number of leadership positions in institutions. The study showed that both groups perform multiple roles in rural development including involvement in the commercialization of agriculture, agribusiness and non-agricultural business, leadership roles in institutional development, community welfare services, and as local change agents. However, the study showed men and women exhibited some variations in exercising those roles.

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream literature on progressive farmers (Ahmad Mahdzan 1980; Rogers 1983; Sofranco *et al.* 1988) concentrates on analyses which lack disaggregation based on gender. However, a growing concern about the need for such gender-based analyses has resulted from the global awareness that men and women farmers have different but significant roles to play in economic development (Boserup 1970; Agarwal 1985; Kandiyoti 1985). In Malaysia, for example, women farmers constituted 43.3% of the total female labour force in 1980, whereas men

farmers constituted 33.2% of the total labour force (Statistics Department 1985). Hence, analyses on farm employment, farmers' roles and contributions to the economy require a gender breakdown.

The term gender is based on the assumption that relations between men and women are socially constituted. It is different from the term sex, which is derived from biological characteristics of being male and female (Whitehead 1979:10). Therefore, the term gender relations distinguishes such social relations between men and women from those

characteristics which can be derived from biological differences.

The significance of adopting the concept of gender is based on two assumptions. First, the problems faced by women are not caused by women, but are a result of the relations between men and women in the social system. Second, it is assumed that the roles of men and women are complementary.

It is widely assumed that progressive farmers, as the term implies, play a significant role in agricultural production. Their number in a community is generally very small, less than 2.5% (Rogers 1983). In many ways, however, circumstances allow them to exercise many other roles, both agricultural as well as non-agricultural, within the entire complex system of rural development.

According to Rogers' adopter categorization (Rogers 1983), progressive farmers are synonymous with the categories of innovators and early adopters. Both groups of farmers are innovative, that is very eager to try new ideas. They are influential leaders in the village in terms of disseminating new ideas to other villagers, besides their other functions in managing local institutional development. Progressive farmers also have a stable economic base, a criterion which allows them to cope with high degrees of uncertainty about venturing into various economic activities. In the Malaysian context, the group of progressive farmers is made up of those large farmers contributing significantly to agricultural productivity. They are self-reliant farmers with above average agricultural resources and exercising important roles in commercial agriculture. Those who won the "Farmers of the Year" award, at both state and national levels, are certainly among those in the group of progressive farmers.

This paper reports a study conducted on progressive farmers; the objectives were to examine some socio-economic characteristics of men and women progressive farmers, and to compare and contrast their roles in exercising rural development tasks. This knowledge has implications for planning policy and action programmes for the development of both groups of farmers. More attention should be given to such progressive farmers in terms of increasing their number and of recognizing their various roles since they contribute significantly to the sustainability of the agricultural sector.

METHODOLOGY

The respondents of the study were taken from the winners of the "Farmer of the Year" national award, during the period from 1981 to 1992.

Each year there are two winners, one man and one woman farmer. Therefore, during that period, there was a total of 24 winners, 12 male and 12 female farmers, from all states in Malaysia.

Data were gathered from respondents using indepth interviews, covering their life and socio-economic background, both past and present. Data related to their roles in agriculture and their related functions in the development of the village were also secured during the interviews.

A preliminary analysis was done after interviewing each man and woman respondent. After interviewing seven male and six female respondents, who were from the states of Perlis, Kedah, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor, the researcher believed that the data collected had reached a saturation point. This is a point where further information obtained by increasing the number of respondents will give repeated responses and is, therefore, redundant. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) referred to this situation as a point of diminishing returns. Therefore, it was decided that the total number of respondents of this study was thirteen.

A tape recorder was used to facilitate the interviews. Data were then transcribed and analysed based on the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic Characteristics

The average age of the men and women progressive farmers in 1993 when the study was conducted, was similar, 52.0 years for men and 51.2 years for women. The age range was 39 to 60 years for men and 40 to 60 years for women. A greater difference was evident in educational attainment. The women farmers had attended formal school for an average of 8.0 years, compared to only 6.1 years for the men farmers. The number of years of education ranged from 1 - 13 for women and 3 - 11 years for men. These differences could be one of the conditions leading to the differences in the role intensity exercised by women and men progressive farmers which are explained later.

Another different characteristic between men and women farmers was family size. Men farmers had bigger families (11.7 with a range of 6 - 40 persons), compared to those of female farmers (6.7 with range of 4 - 10 persons). This was due to the polygamous marriages of two of the men progressive farmers (one has three wives with 36 children and the other has two wives with 11 children). Among the women progressive farmers two were divorced.

Land acreage owned by men and women progressive farmers was generally similar, with average ownership of 32.3 acres (range of 14 - 55 acres) for men, and 32.8 acres (range of 12 - 50 acres) for women. This is very much higher than the average acreage owned by individual women and men among rural households of 0.4 and 3.8 acres, respectively. It is also very much higher than the size of land ownership cited by national standards of 4.45 acres in mixed farming areas in Selangor (Maimunah 1993) and 3.71 acres for MADA farmers (Ahmad Mahdzan 1980). Almost all the land acreage owned by men and women farmers as reported in this study was acquired through purchase. This shows that all progressive farmers, male and female, were able to buy land by themselves.

Much of the land that the progressive farmers now own was purchased slowly during the 1970s and 1980s when the price of land was still low. These lots had become available as many smallholders were forced to sell their land because of a variety of problems such as idle land, lack of contiguity of lots owned, and a shortage of capital and labour. There were no noticeable differences in the way men and women progressive farmers bought their land. All of them said that they purchased land either by using their own savings or through bank loans.

The substantial land acreage owned by both men and women progressive farmers had the potential to give them a stable monthly income ranging from RM3000¹ to RM7000, with an average of RM4500. The wide range of income was dependent on the type of cultivation they practised for a particular period, and the size of farming enterprise in which they engaged. Income was higher when more short-term cashcrops such as corn, papaya, and vegetables

were planted and with returns from poultry and fish rearing.

The study identified two common characteristics in the background of the men and women progressive farmers. All of them came from poor families. With hard work and dedication they had managed to achieve upward social mobility through their serious involvement in farming over two or three decades.

Another important characteristic of men and women progressive farmers which determines their role in the community is the number of local social institutions each respondent is affiliated to, either as a key leader or as a committee member.

The average number of institutions in which men and women progressive farmer had leadership roles was four and seven, with the range of 1 - 7 and 4 - 12, respectively. One reason for the difference was the dearth of women leaders in a particular community, which resulted in women leaders each being compelled to take on a number of leadership roles. This has meant that a women progressive farmer tends to become a leader in almost all local institutions.

By contrast, male progressive farmers had fewer chances to assume more than one leadership role due to a preponderance of potential male leaders in a particular locality. This difference, in turn, explains the intensity of men and women progressive farmers' leadership roles in institutional development which will be explained later.

The main characteristics of men and women progressive farmers are summarized in Table 1.

Roles in Rural Development

Rural development is generally defined as the integrated efforts towards achieving the goals of enhanced agricultural productivity of the rural population, and their full participation in both planning and implementing development programmes, as well as reaping the benefits of the programmes. This means that rural development should encompass agricultural production programmes as well as community development and institutional development programmes.

1. RM stands for Malaysian ringgit, the Malaysian unit of currency. One US dollar is equivalent to about 2.6 Malaysian ringgit.

TABLE 1
Some salient characteristics of
men and women progressive farmers

Characteristics	Men		Women	
	range	average	range	average
Age (years)	39-60	52.0	40-60	51.2
Attendance at formal school (years)	3-11	6.1	1-13	8.0
Family size (persons)	6-40	11.7	4-10	6.7
Land owned (acres)	14-55	32.3	12-50	32.8
Income/month (RM)	3000-7000	4500	3000-7000	4500
Number of local institutions affiliated to as key leader or as committee member	1-7	4	4-12	7

The results of the study demonstrate that both men and women progressive farmers have many roles in rural development. The various roles of men and women progressive farmers are now compared and contrast as follows:

Commercialization of Agriculture

All the men and women progressive farmers played a very important role in the commercialization of agriculture. This is defined as the efforts towards increasing the productivity of agriculture (crops and livestock) with the main purpose of earning income by trading and marketing the agricultural produce to industries and consumers. Agricultural commercialization, one of the important strategies of the new National Agriculture Policy, is the function of two factors, namely, productivity and diversification of agriculture.

Higher productivity in agriculture is achieved through modernization and capital-intensive use of resources (high-yielding crop varieties and livestock species) and labour-saving technologies (mechanization and better systems of farm management). Diversification, on the other hand, is necessary because it allows multiplicity in crop farming and livestock rearing for a given agricultural area, especially commodities with a

higher commercial value. Diversification of agriculture is a base for the creation of a strong local food production and processing industry, and therefore, an approach to increase productivity of agricultural produce, so as to meet the changing needs of consumers and industries.

The role of both men and women progressive farmers in agriculture productivity is shown by their serious involvement in farming, particularly in the use of medium to fairly high capital-intensive technologies. For example, all the progressive farmers used commercial fertilizers in the cultivation of oil-palm and cocoa and short-term crops such as banana, corn, papaya and vegetables. In poultry rearing, they adopted the franchise system in which the enterprise was administered on a systematic management of input-and-output delivery. There were at least 3,000 chicken reared per batch. The necessary inputs such as day-old-chicks, animal feed, medicines and pesticides were supplied by the authorities, and the chicken would later be marketed on a contract basis.

An important characteristic enabling progressive farmers to diversify agriculture beyond the capability of the average Malaysian farmer was their high acreage of landholdings.

This alone made it possible for them to engage in both long-term and short-term cash crop cultivation. Important long-term cash crops cultivated by both men and women progressive farmers were oil-palm, rubber, cocoa, fruit and coconuts. Short-term (seasonal) crops included banana, corn, vegetables, paddy, pineapple and tapioca. Most men and women progressive farmers diversified their farming with livestock rearing such as poultry, sheep, goat and quail rearing. In addition, most had some experience in fish rearing even though it was not currently their major farming enterprise.

Involvement in Agribusiness

One outcome of agricultural diversification is the tendency towards increased involvement in the agribusiness system. This encompasses three main sub-systems: the agricultural input industry, agricultural production industry, and downstream activities industry. This study demonstrates that all the men and women progressive farmers made significant contributions to the growth of the agribusiness system in their respective localities, especially in the agricultural production and downstream sub-systems. In the cultivation of short-term cash crops, not only were progressive farmers the producers, they were also involved in the marketing of their produce and the manufacturing of food products such as chilli and tomato sauce, fruit jams and juices, snack foods such as banana and tapioca chips, and food delicacies. Some of these manufactured foods they sold themselves at farmers' and evening markets, while some products were sold in bulk to wholesalers. About 50% percent of the progressive farmers were also the local dealers for rubber, dried cocoa beans, bananas and vegetables in their respective localities.

Besides farming, both men and women progressive farmers were also involved in contract businesses such as land preparation and planting, the supply of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides to other farming institutions and the selling of hill-soil used for construction work.

Two factors determined a high level of involvement of men and women progressive farmers in agribusiness. First, their diversified agricultural production, and secondly their better linkages with many market outlets outside their farming localities. However, a slight difference was noted. Men's linkages were far away from

their villages, perhaps in other districts, but women were linked with other market business components within the vicinity of their village.

Involvement in Non-Agricultural Business

The study showed that men and women progressive farmers were also involved in non-agricultural businesses. But one difference was the greater range of non-agricultural activities among the women. These included running restaurants, sundry shops, souvenir and handicraft shops, tailoring school uniforms, and rural co-operatives. Men's involvement in non-agricultural businesses was narrower in scope, mainly in running sundry shops and as small-scale contractors supplying stationery and school equipment. Such differences could be explained by the latter's involvement in agricultural businesses far away from their respective villages while the women's involvement in agriculture businesses seldom exceeded the boundary of their villages.

Leadership Role in Institutional Development

As mentioned earlier, all the progressive farmers were leaders in their communities; they were chairmen or committee members of local institutions. A gender difference in the leadership role was exhibited in the tendency for a woman progressive farmer to be a leader in almost all local institutions, whether social or economic-based.

The institutions in which men progressive farmers were the leader or a member in the leadership committee were: Village Development and Security Committee (VDSC), Farmers Co-operative, Farmers Group, Mosque Development Committee, School Parent-Teacher Association, Ex-Soldiers Development Committee, Community Services Committee, divisional political party committee, Malay Contractors' Association, Youth Association, the promotion for the Farmers' Market Committee and Religious Group. On the other hand, women progressive farmers, besides being the leader of the women's section or unit of the above associations, were all also key leaders in other women's units of development agencies such as RISDA (Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority), KEMAS (Community Development Division of the Ministry of Rural Development) and the Department of Agriculture. In contrast, male progressive farmers had fewer chances to assume more than one leadership role in local

institutions due to a preponderance of potential male leaders (whether farmers or non-farmers) in a particular locality.

Welfare Role in Community

Welfare role in community is defined as the voluntary activities one performs to complement the existing community development programmes or to maintain community livelihood.

The study revealed that women progressive farmers were more involved than their men counterparts in community welfare activities. The activities included: adopting children of problem families, providing services in community gatherings and religious classes, giving services to the community through rural co-operatives, and providing employment to other women through income-generating projects owned by women farmers' groups. One woman respondent reported that she had been involved in such community welfare activities for the past 30 years without receiving any allowance.

Role as Local Change Agents

A change agent is defined as one who acts as an informal educator, helping other individuals in the community to learn ways of improving their performance in their daily productive and social tasks at grassroot level.

Women progressive farmers were found to have a more important role as local change agents than the men. Their high level of involvement as local change agents implies that they fulfil the role of extension and non-formal educators of local leaders. This has some connection with women's leadership and welfare roles in the community as discussed earlier. Two women progressive farmers were heavily involved in organizing and teaching specific skills needed by the villagers. Examples of such programmes were on-the-job training for youths in skills related to the cultivation of short-term cash crops such as corn, papaya and vegetables, and in skills of poultry, freshwater fish and aquarium fish rearing. The programmes were sponsored by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Another two women progressive farmers organized training for members of a women's club in the manufacturing of snack foods and in tailoring, in order to prepare club members to venture into other enterprising activities.

The study also showed that half of the women progressive farmers were KEMAS

teachers, conducting non-formal education classes, training rural women in income-generating projects such as tailoring, handicrafts and agriculture.

A lower level of involvement of male progressive farmers as local change agents was due to their stronger linkages with agribusinesses outside their village or district boundary. In this sense, male progressive farmers are said to be more cosmopolitan than their female counterparts, hence reducing their opportunity for contact with local villagers. They could not be approached and consulted as often as the female progressive farmers in matters related to farming and other income-generating skills.

The higher involvement of women progressive farmers in leadership and welfare responsibilities, and their greater role as local change agents could be explained from the notion that women's social role outside the house is seen as closer to nature, which, in turn, ties them down to domestic responsibilities. Men, on the other hand, are seen as free to go far beyond home/village boundaries, having wider social movement and social contacts (Ortner 1978).

A summary of the roles of men and women progressive farmers in rural development is shown in Table 2.

CONCLUSION

There were both similarities and differences in the roles of men and women progressive farmers in rural development. Both groups of farmers made significant contributions towards agricultural production, diversification and commercialization. Important factors sustaining the commercial status of both groups of progressive farmers were the acreage of their landholdings, and their constant involvement in both agro-based and non-agricultural businesses; such factors have assured them of a constant income from agriculture. Women progressive farmers, especially those who headed their households, were also found to be engaged in other non-agricultural business activities.

Female progressive farmers had a greater leadership role in local social institutions than the male progressive farmers. This was due to the limited number of women progressive farmers available in a given community. Men progressive farmers tended to distribute the community leadership roles to other male leaders because of the preponderance of the latter.

TABLE 2
Roles of men and women progressive farmers in rural development

Role	Men Progressive Farmers	Women Progressive Farmers
Commercialization of agriculture	<p>Long-term cash crops: oil-palm, rubber, cocoa, coconut, fruit orchards, (star-fruit and dokong). Short-term cash crops: paddy, banana, vegetables, pineapple, tobacco, corn.</p> <p>Livestock: poultry, sheep and goats.</p>	<p>Long-term cash crops: oil-palm, rubber, cocoa, fruit orchards, especially mango. Short-term cash crops: vegetables, banana, corn, papaya.</p> <p>Livestock: quail, poultry, freshwater and aquarium fish</p>
Involvement in agribusiness	<p>As producers of the above commodities Involved in marketing of commodities Small-scale industries making chilli and tomato sauces, soya sauce, snack foods Local dealer for rubber and dried cocoa beans Agriculture contractors supplying agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides, land preparation and planting Better linkages with components in agribusiness system</p>	<p>As producers of the above commodities Involved in marketing Producers of small-scale manufactured products such as fruit jams and juices Local dealers for rubber and dried cocoa beans</p>
Involvement in non-agribusiness	<p>Sundry shop Contractors (Class F, below RM200,000 capital), school equipment supplier</p>	<p>Restaurant Souvenir shop Handicraft shop Tailoring, school uniforms Transport company Rural co-operatives (Businesses are more diversified)</p>
Leadership role in institutional development	<p>Leadership roles more spread because there were many male leaders in a community</p>	<p>Female progressive farmers were leaders in almost all associations of women/women's section of any institution Not many women leaders</p>
Welfare role in community	<p>Community gatherings Provide employment to other workers</p>	<p>Adopt children of problem families Community gathering Organize and lead associations of widows and divorcees Co-operative services Provide employment to other women through women's projects</p>
Role as local change agents	<p>Less involved as local change agents Have more linkages with business components outside community system</p>	<p>More involved as local change agents compared to men Training for youth in fish and farm production KEMAS teacher in the village Support the role of Extension and NFE roles of opinion leaders</p>

The study also concluded that women progressive farmers had a larger role than their male counterparts in welfare services to the community and as local change agents.

These conclusions have implications for extension and development planning. Even though the number of progressive farmers is very small in any community, especially in Malaysia, their contributions to agriculture and rural development are substantial. Malaysia has the potential to increase the number of farmers with characteristics closer to those of progressive farmers through its strategies under the new National Agriculture Policy (NAP) (1992 to 2010)².

Optimizing resources used, accelerated agro-based industries development, and enhancement of R and D efforts through technological creations are among the agricultural transformation strategies aimed at developing viable and self-reliant farmers.

It is imperative that any extension and development programme targeted at the rural population should clearly specify the gender of the clientele involved. This would facilitate the implementation of the programmes in terms of approach, place and time to contact the different types of audience. These considerations are needed because both male and female farmers have equal potential to achieve the status of progressive farmers.

The study also implies that extension and non-formal education programmes should capitalize on both male and female progressive farmers in their planning and execution because they are among the influential people in any community who can help expedite the success of the programme. They should be involved, for instance, not only in developing village-based projects and programmes but also in the research and development activities since both groups of farmers have vast practical experience in farming. In fact, one of the strategies of the new National Agricultural Policy is commercialization of agriculture in which progressive farmers have

tremendous roles to play as this country moves towards achieving the goal of developed nation status in the second decade of the 21st century.

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2. The new NAP (1992 to 2010) was formulated in 1991 based on earlier NAP set in 1984. The overriding objective of the NAP (1992-2010) is the maximization of income through the optimal utilization of resources in the agriculture sector. Other strategies are a greater role of the private sector, reformed marketing strategy, expanded food production, human resource development, development of viable and self-reliant farmers, and restructuring, including greater Bumiputera participation.

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(Received 5 April 1994)