

## WOMEN'S ROLES IN FISHING AMONG TWO "SEA PEOPLE" SOCIETIES OF MALAYSIA AND THAILAND

**Barbara S. Nowak\***

Asia Research Institute,  
National University of Singapore,  
Singapore 259770  
[aribsn@nus.edu.sg](mailto:aribsn@nus.edu.sg)

Fishing is typically designated as a masculine-based activity. This is even the case when women are involved in tasks both directly related to the industry such as marketing and processing of produce and indirectly by performing activities in the reproductive domain which allow men the freedom to go to sea knowing their families are cared for. Some descriptions go so far as to say that fishing-based societies are male dominated. There are however, a few, small-scale societies in which women's participation in fishing is more than a supporting or peripheral role. When secondary sources refer to these societies the descriptions more often than not, seem to be inaccurate. Possibly, their uniqueness makes them incomprehensible. For example, in the 1980s, I described the socio-economic life of Hma' Btsisi', an *Orang Asli* ("indigenous") coastal community in Peninsula Malaysia. Btsisi' are traditionally a community of littoral / mangrove residing people in which wives and husbands, jointly as partners, worked together in fishing and other marine extracting activities as well as land-based tasks. This paper is rarely referenced, and the few, infrequent times it is, authors have more often than not, misunderstood my discussion of women's participation in fishery activities, as depicting women as their husbands' assistants.

In this paper, I propose first to describe Btsisi' livelihood activities and the gendered division of labour with a focus on marine- and mangrove-based activities. I will discuss Btsisi' ideas about marriage and their perceptions of an ideal marital relationship. Such a discussion is necessary in order to understand why Btsisi' have a division of labor which supports flexibility and cooperation between husband and wife thus allowing for and reinforcing women's involvement in fishing activities.

The second purpose of this paper will be comparative in perspective. I will explore why Btsisi' in the contemporary period continue to support a division of labour which allows women to carry on their fishing even though Btsisi' no longer follow traditional patterns of living on boats. In order to develop an understanding of this continued pattern, I will compare Btsisi' with a Sea Gypsy community of southern Thailand who also traditionally resided on boats. Btsisi' were at one time called "*Orang Laut*", or "Sea People." Sometimes they were categorised as Sea Nomads as were Sea Gypsy communities who inhabit Thailand and Burma's coasts. In both societies, families traditionally reside on boats and gained their livelihoods from the sea, and both societies have undergone dramatic changes including a shift to a more sedentary, land-based life. Evidence suggests the two societies' adaptation to land-based residential living have resulted in women's roles taking divergent paths. This paper will examine the differing adaptations the two traditionally boat residing communities have made to a more sedentary existence on land and how this is reflected in their gender division of labour. In order to accomplish this, I will describe the types of maritime and landed activities both communities perform as well as an exploration as to what people say are the reasons for their contemporary gendered roles.

If there is time I would like to discuss one overriding issue affecting all fishing communities. Fisherfolk I have spoken with in Malaysia, Thailand and Aceh, are all concerned about the depleted fish stocks and its impact on their livelihoods. This, in conjunction with increasing petrol prices is making fishing an activity which is no longer financially viable. People are therefore relinquishing their fishing livelihoods in order to ensure their families' material well-being.