



# **The impact of tourism on gender relations among communities living near Mt. Kinabalu, Sabah**

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## **Summary**

The increasing popularity of Mt. Kinabalu and Sabah with tourists has led to the employment of a large number of locals. Mt. Kinabalu (4,095.2m), the highest point between Irian Jaya and the Himalayas, is situated in Sabah, east Malaysia. The mountain is 83km from Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah and focal point of the whole Kinabalu National Park, which covers an area of 754 sq km. Besides tourism, the Mt. Kinabalu region is also economically important as a producer of highland vegetables and flowers. Traditionally, Sabah's women are entrusted with the care and upbringing of children, household tasks, production-related activities, and as ritual specialists and healers.

The onset of development has, however, had an impact on the traditional society, specifically the traditional gender balance. About 30% of the indigenous Dusun-speaking community are employed in the hotel/hospitality industries, in private companies, and as government servants. This paper investigates tourism as an agent of change and will concentrate on gender relations between the two groups of labour, namely, the mountain guides and the porters.

Preliminary observations show that the division of labour between mountain guides and porters is largely based on gender, determined by the park authority which insists on taking only male mountain guides and mountain porters who are almost exclusively female. The use of mountain guides for climbing Mt. Kinabalu is compulsory, while the option of hiring mountain porters is used by one-third of tourists.

Today, around 80% of the population in the research area are involved in agricultural activities, especially swidden agriculture and vegetable farming. In a 1999 study, Schulze and Suriani noted that work related to swidden agriculture, such as selecting the field, digging and sowing, harvesting, winnowing, pounding, husking, and storing, is largely undertaken by both sexes, but young men are not interested in cultivation anymore. Hence, women are left to decide on the field site and on the rice types to be sown. Among older couples, the man still decides on the field site, while women select the rice species to be sown. Although the household sphere had notions of male and female tasks, the actual boundaries between the two are not clearly demarcated. Generally, 'heavy' tasks such as building houses and hard physical labour in the fields were for men, while women concentrated on lighter domestic and agricultural work.

One of the principal tourist activities in Sabah is the climb of Mt. Kinabalu. It may seem intimidating, but Mt. Kinabalu is actually one of the easiest mountains in the world to climb. Such tourist interest in Mt. Kinabalu has necessitated the employment of mountain guides and mountain porters. The mountain guide assists climbers, looks after their safety, and provides information or instructions, or even motivation, and offers companionship. A group of eight or less must employ one guide with an additional guide for a group between eight to 16. In recent years, for reasons of safety, the park authority has increased the guide to tourist ratio from 1:12 to 1: 8. Every mountain guide is registered with Sabah Parks and is licensed. Able to earn up to 210US\$ per month, some mountain guides prefer to work as guides and to use half their income to pay for labour on their farm.

In contrast, a mountain porter provides the service of carrying the climber's belongings, and is paid on the basis of the load carried. Normally, payment is made after the safe arrival of the luggage at Timpohon Gate or the park headquarters. The individual client's luggage seldom reaches 5kg, and it is common for climbers to pool their belongings and employ one porter. An adult porter can carry up to 30kg. Due to a limited demand for their services, it is common for a porter to carry from 10 to 17kg, far below their capacity, and a porter may also carry the canteen supply for the Laban Rata restaurant of the park. The payment for the latter is less, but porters have the option of optimising their load, and they can return home after unloading at the canteen. The payment is made every two weeks, which is not viable if one needs instant cash. Sometimes, porter services are required for special purposes. Joana Agak remembered once being asked to carry camera stands and cameras for a Taiwan TV crew during the Kinabalu Climbathon of 2001. Porters also receive a small payment for every bag of rubbish they bring down from the Laban Rata restaurant for disposal outside the Kinabalu Park area.

Where income is concerned, all respondents agreed that porters earn more than mountain guides, but men prefer to work as guides rather than as



porters. Women are found to earn more due to the payment structure of porters. The qualifications required to become a porter are flexible. In general, 70% of porters are adult females, 20% adult males, and 10% children below 15 and men and women above 50. While the official requirement is for porters to be 18 and above, this is not followed stringently by the Kinabalu Park Authority or the local inhabitants. As far as the locals are concerned, anyone can become a porter provided they are physically fit and know the route. Since only the villagers in nearby areas are actively involved as guides and porters, husband and wife may work together on the same day, perhaps with different groups of climbers. They will eventually reach the same destination, and might meet at Laban Rata where they may stay overnight if the wife is working as a porter. Mountain guides may earn less money than porters, but they enjoy a higher social status and better job security (with license, insurance, and better regulations).

Apart from the traditional swidden agriculture, it is tourism that has created new economic opportunities. Approximately 90% of the respondents are involved in new activities such as growing and selling vegetables or other commercial agricultural products such as pineapples and exotic hill rice, handicrafts, or they work full- or part-time in tourism-related fields. Commercially-based activities, such as growing vegetables, have no strict gender division of labour. Thus, husband and wife can complement each other's work and are able to venture into other economic activities. Porters and mountain guides gain a double advantage – using their land for vegetable growing (and other commercially-based activities) and using the excess time to work as a porter or guide. In a typical but loose division of labour for vegetable growers, the man concentrates on the garden while the woman concentrates on selling and other business dealings.

Commercially-based agriculture creates more opportunities for women for a number of reasons. First, since women are at the end of the production chain (selling), they have more control over the family income. The woman's contribution to the family income complements her control over its use. Second, the availability of wholesale markets has speeded up the process of vegetables sales, but not of growing them. This has given women extra time compared to their male counterparts who concentrate on cultivation. They can either help their husbands in agricultural work or become porters to bring in an instant and reliable income. Third, since vegetable stalls are built in a row by the roadside, women can look after each other's vegetables if any of them takes on a portering assignment or has to attend to other matters. Thus, they secure an uninterrupted chain of marketing activity as long as they have vegetables to sell.

Women's contribution to the economic well-being of the family (through work as porters and other economic activities) has changed general social attitudes. According to Sokiam Lusuyun, her husband (who has never been on the

mountain) is grateful she has a part-time job that helps to provide some of the family's necessities.

Some of the women respondents pointed out that, whereas they do traditional domestic work at home, the opportunity to earn an extra income for the family cannot be resisted. Besides the husband's support and understanding, community support, especially of close relatives, is important in their decision to work as porters. Many of the middle-aged porters, who have small children, leave them with grandparents and aunts or at school. Strong community ties and support reduce the mother's anxiety while working on the mountain. Despite that, mountain guides and some of the male mountain porters still prefer the traditional division of labour between men and women.

If the children are young, parents may take turns to work on the mountain. If the children are already in school, the support of close relatives may be required if both parents work. Some children may be able to follow their parents to the mountain during weekends and school breaks, even becoming porters themselves.

Being able to climb Mt. Kinabalu is considered an achievement for those that are moderately fit. The traditional Dusun believes that heavy tasks require strength and endurance. Mountain guides and porters, however, have additional burdens. Guides are responsible for the safety of climbers and for dealing with life and death situations. In contrast, mountain porters have to do the kind of heavy work traditionally reserved for men, requiring strength and endurance – porters carry up to five times more than loads carried by ordinary climbers and have to move almost twice as fast.

The Kinabalu Park Authority regulates the selection of mountain guides on a first-come first-served basis, with priority given to those previously unselected. When a mountain guide is identified, he may ask the group under his care if anyone needs a porter and, if there is a request, he will engage the number of porters required. The selection of porters is left to the discretion of the mountain guide. But he follows certain unwritten criteria.

- Priority should be given to those who have not been selected previously (including the day before).
- In case every porter present has been selected previously, priority will be on a first-come first-served basis.
- Since mountain guides and porters come from a small number of villages, they know each other and are often related. These family ties enable them to follow the unwritten rules effectively; not doing so may have negative effects on their relationship with fellow villagers. Mountain porters are not as regulated as mountain guides and have greater individual freedom to negotiate with climbers, especially if it is the climbers who approached them. Some climbers feel more secure if they choose their porters personally.



The mountain guides and porters who have to remain overnight in Laban Rata Restaurant stay in quarters provided for them. They have to do basic domestic work such as cooking and cleaning. Mountain guides and porters have to cook for themselves or bring their own food even if their relatives or spouses are working on the same day. That is because guides and porters will most likely have to travel with different groups or persons, regardless of family ties with other porters or guides.

In general, porters arrive sooner at Laban Rata because they have the option to walk with the fastest moving climbers who employ them. If the wife (porter) arrives earlier, she usually does not cook for her husband (guide) because she cannot predict when he will arrive. Relatives, though, may cook together if they arrive at the same time. In the rare event of husband and wife being together, traditional roles continue to operate on the mountain.

To make sure that quarters are ready for the night, female porters must ascend to Laban Rata to clean up. They must clean inside and outside their sleeping quarters while waiting for climbers to descend from the summit. In a gendered division of labour, the female porters clean inside the quarters, while male porters clean the outside. Female porters will have to make the guides' beds, clean the kitchen and the washing areas, and sweep the floor, while the male porters (especially boys) are left to do minor cleaning outside the quarters.

The Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon is an annual race covering 21km from the starting point to the summit and back again. Originally the Kinabalu Park's efforts to prepare its male park rangers for emergency evacuation, the Climbathon is today an internationally acclaimed challenge that attracts top international athletes. The prize money offered can be a year-end bonus for mountain guides and porters who climb the mountain regularly, as many as 80 times a year, and have a distinct advantage over outsiders. A female porter took sixth place when she was 40 and fifth in her second attempt, and another woman managed fifth position in 2001.

As far as strength and endurance is concerned, the Mount Kinabalu Climbathon has provided formal recognition that mountain guides and mountain porters are both capable of outdoing each other, and that strength should not necessarily be measured in terms of gender.

## **Conclusion**

Family ties and a strong community spirit, while enforcing the traditional division of labour, has also become another element in empowering women by offering them new economic opportunities. In the new economic setting, women's position at the end of the production chain has given them greater freedom in decision-making, especially with regard to family expenditure, saving, and investment.

The notion that men are qualified to do heavier work remains in place with minor modifications. Safety is the major concern of the park authority and, traditionally, since men were seen to fit that role, the stereotype of superior male strength has been perpetuated. Thus, men have been given the 'important' work of mountain guides. Practices such as assigning women porters the task of cleaning at Laban Rata demonstrate the influence of traditional gender divisions of labour even in an increasingly market-driven society.

