

Building Awareness, Empowering Women: The Legal Literacy Programme in Kuala Nerus, Terengganu

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Abstract

In Terengganu, as in many other regions, women's awareness of their legal rights remains a significant challenge. Despite progress in legal reforms and increasing access to education, many women continue to lack knowledge about their rights under civil and syariah law, particularly in matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. This lack of awareness is often compounded by cultural norms, limited media exposure, and inadequate access to legal resources. Realizing this issue, a literacy programme initiative has been conducted to examine the awareness of women on their rights. The study evaluated the impact of such legal literacy programme on women in Kuala Nerus district of Terengganu for the purpose to increase awareness and understanding of their rights in both civil and syariah law. By analyzing pre and post programme assessments, this study highlighted the success and challenges of such initiative in empowering women to seek legal protection and justice. The findings indicated a significant improvement in legal awareness among participants, as well as highlighted areas requiring further attention, particularly in the enforcement of legal rights and the accessibility of legal aid to women.

Keywords: Rights of Women, Literacy, Terengganu, Awareness, Family

Introduction

Three main issues faced by women today are sexual harassment, sexual violence, and physical violence. Reported cases are high, yet women still lack awareness and tend to disregard the seriousness of these incidents (IPSOS, 2024). Recently, the Chairperson of the Women, Family, and Community Development Committee of Kedah highlighted that both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to enhance awareness and educational programmes about women's rights, along with a stronger law enforcement to ensure that women's rights are truly protected. Although laws in Malaysia have done much to protect

women's rights, social and cultural stigma still sometimes prevent women from claiming their rights (Farah, 2025). Sinar Harian (2021) reported that many wives do not claim their rights to marital assets after divorce. According to legal practitioners, some wives are only aware that they need to obey their husbands without understanding their rights in the event of divorce or death, due to a lack of exposure to family law and Syariah court matters. Living conditions, poverty, financial issues, and not being employed also contribute to women's ignorance of their rights under the law. A scholarly study conducted in 2022 found that many Muslim women face difficulties in claiming their rights after divorce. Many of these difficulties stem from a lack of awareness and knowledge about the rights and procedures for making claims as stipulated by the law. Their awareness and knowledge of post-divorce rights are crucial to prevent abuse and injustice from occurring (Mustafa & Nasohah, 2022). Similar issue is shared by Paslan (2024) when she found that lack of awareness about their rights is a major obstacle in obtaining the justice they deserve.

Thus, legal literacy is a fundamental component in empowering individuals, particularly women, to navigate and assert their rights within a legal framework. In many societies, women often face challenges related to discrimination, legal unawareness, and difficulties in accessing justice. Malaysia, with its dual legal system comprising Syariah and civil laws, presents a unique landscape where legal literacy is crucial in ensuring that women understand and exercise their rights effectively. The "*Bicarawara Literasi Undang-Undang: Wanita dan Hak*" programme was held recently by Faculty of Law and International Relations of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin to address these concerns by providing legal education to women, equipping them with the necessary knowledge to seek legal assistance and to stand up for their rights. This programme aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme by assessing participants' understanding before and after attending the programme, identifying key areas for improvement, and making recommendations to strengthen future initiatives. It is conducted to produce women who are aware of women's issues and rights, particularly in Kuala Nerus district of Terengganu, by delivering accurate knowledge and information on current issues surrounding women's rights. This will empower women to think critically and make informed decisions to safeguard their well-being. The programme also seeks to strengthen participation in lifelong learning to empower women and build self-reliance, ultimately contributing to their overall awareness and advocacy for their rights.

This research contributes towards developing Women's Empowerment Theory through legal awareness, emphasizing how understanding legal rights can empower women in everyday life. A legal literacy programme on women's rights can reduce gender-based violence, enhance economic participation, and support gender equality, while strengthening the rule of law and promoting inclusive policy changes at the national level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have been conducted on women's rights in Malaysia, particularly in family-related issues such as marriage and divorce. However, most of these studies focus on religious (Syariah and *fiqh*), psychological, and social perspectives. There is a notable lack of research focusing specifically on the legal aspects that pertain to women in Terengganu.

Some studies that examined both religious and legal perspectives include Ismail & Mahamad Isa (2024), whose study titled *Item Nafkah selain Keperluan Asas dalam Perintah Nafkah*, explored the financial support obligations in divorce cases. Another significant study by

Nabilah et. Al. (2024) examined the factors contributing to divorce among youth in Seberang Perai Utara under Islamic family law. Harun, et al. (2024) discussed the dowry rates in Pahang, while Hazram (2024) addressed the issue of child marriage in Malaysia from Syariah perspective. Supaat et. al. (2024) provided a critical examination of vulnerabilities and the legal protection afforded under Islamic family law in Malaysia. Meanwhile, Paslan (2024) studied on empowerment of women's rights in marriage in Malaysia from perspective of syariah lawyers and family counseling practitioners.

While these studies contribute valuable insights, they tend to focus on specific aspects of family law or religious principles, leaving a gap in research specifically addressing the legal rights of women in Terengganu. Further exploration in this area is crucial to understanding how awareness on law and procedures can better support and protect women in this region.

Methodology

This study performed qualitative research using survey method to analyse awareness aspect among women in Kuala Nerus district of State of Terengganu about their legal rights. The "*Bicarawara Literasi Undang-Undang: Wanita dan Hak*" programme was initiated under the Knowledge Transfer Programme (KTP) grant by Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniZA) in collaboration with multiple agencies, namely the Syariah Judiciary Department of Terengganu (JKST), the Legal Aid Department (JBG), the Terengganu Syariah Lawyer Association (PPST) and two NGOs called Pertubuhan Aspirasi Jaringan Wanita (AJWA) and Persatuan Wanita IKRAM Terengganu. The programme was carried out at Perdana Hall, UniZA and comprised of 4 slots of speech. Slot 1 and 2 with JBG entitled *Isu Wanita dan Perundangan Sivil dan Syariah*, Slot 3 with JKST entitled *Cabaran Penguatkuasaan Penghakiman Mahkamah Syariah: Kajian Peranan Bahagian Sokongan Keluarga Terhadap Hak Wanita di Terengganu* and Slot 4 with PPST entitled *Hak-hak Wanita dalam Islam: Satu Sorotan Terhadap Perundangan Keluarga Islam di Malaysia*. The programme has been attended by 123 women participants from various background including newly converted Muslim women, single mothers, university staffs, members of NGOs, government officials, and surrounding community members. The slots are organised to raise awareness on key legal topics such as marriage and divorce laws, child custody, domestic violence protections, and financial rights, including spousal and child maintenance. Additionally, the programme sought to bridge the gap between women and legal institutions by providing direct guidance on where and how to seek legal assistance when needed.

In order to achieve the programme objectives, data was collected from the participants before and after the programme was held. Participants were required to fill in google form comprising of questions pertaining to knowledge and awareness on legal rights of women. The pre-questionnaires contain questions to assess their knowledge on where to seek assistance on legal rights, their level of understanding about women's rights when facing problems, and their responsibilities in defending their rights and avoiding injustice. Meanwhile, the post questionnaires consists of questions to access their awareness on how far they understand women's rights under the law before and after the programme, whether they knew the proper channels or agencies to get assistance in solving issues relating to women's rights, their level of awareness in defending their individual rights and avoiding injustice, and their suggestions for improving the programme in the future. Subsequently, comparative analysis was made on the result of both pre and post questionnaires and findings

are formulated to evaluate the awareness of legal rights and effectiveness of the knowledge transfer programme.

The Findings

Malaysia operates under a dual legal system where civil law and Syariah law coexist. This structure impacts women's rights significantly, as different legal provisions apply depending on religious and marital status. Under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 8 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits gender-based discrimination. However, the interpretation and application of this principle vary in different legal contexts.

In civil law, the Employment Act 1955 ensures maternity benefits and workplace protections for women, while the Domestic Violence Act 1994 provides legal protection against domestic abuse. The Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976 governs the non-Muslim marriages, divorce, child custody, and division of matrimonial property. These laws collectively aim to safeguard women's rights and promote gender equality in Malaysia's legal landscape.

In contrast, the Syariah law which applies to Muslims is governed by state-level Islamic family laws, including provisions for marriage, polygamy, divorce, and child custody. The Islamic Family Law Enactment regulates issues such as polygamy, divorce (including *talak*, *fasakh*, and *khuluk*), financial maintenance, and inheritance rights. While Syariah law provides protections for women, its enforcement remains a significant challenge, particularly in cases of non-compliance with maintenance orders. The Family Support Division (BSK) has been established by JKST to assist in enforcing court-ordered maintenance payments, yet many women continue to struggle with enforcement issues.

As mentioned above, to assess the effectiveness of the "Bicarawara Literasi Undang-Undang" programme, data was collected from participants through pre- and post-programme surveys. The findings provide insights into the impact of the programme in enhancing legal awareness among women.

Prior to attending the programme, 50.4% of participants reported that they were unaware of the agencies or legal channels available to assist them in cases of rights violations. Additionally, 33.3% of participants had personally experienced situations where their rights were infringed but did not know how to respond or seek help. Only 5.7% of participants reported having a strong understanding of their legal rights before attending the programme, while 43.9% had a moderate understanding, and the remainder had little or no knowledge of their rights. These statistics underscore the necessity of legal literacy initiatives in addressing the lack of awareness among women.

Following the completion of the programme, a significant improvement in participants' understanding of legal rights was observed. A total of 90.7% of participants reported gaining knowledge about legal aid services and enforcement mechanisms (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

Knowledge on legal aid service

Furthermore, 86.7% of participants stated that they had developed a better understanding of their legal rights (see Table 2 below), while 70.7% emphasized the relevance and importance of the information provided in the programme (see Table 3 below). The post-programme survey also revealed an increase in confidence among participants in asserting their rights and seeking legal assistance when necessary. Majority participants understood very well on women's legal rights after attending the programme compared to before attending it (see Table 4 below).

Table 2

Understanding of legal rights

Table 3

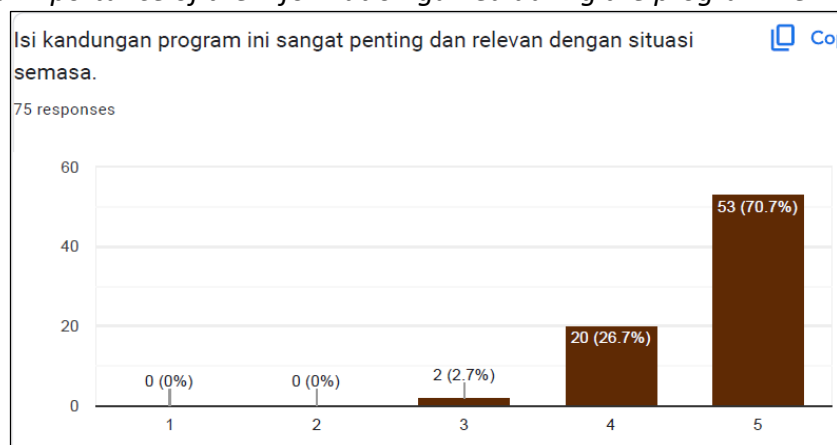
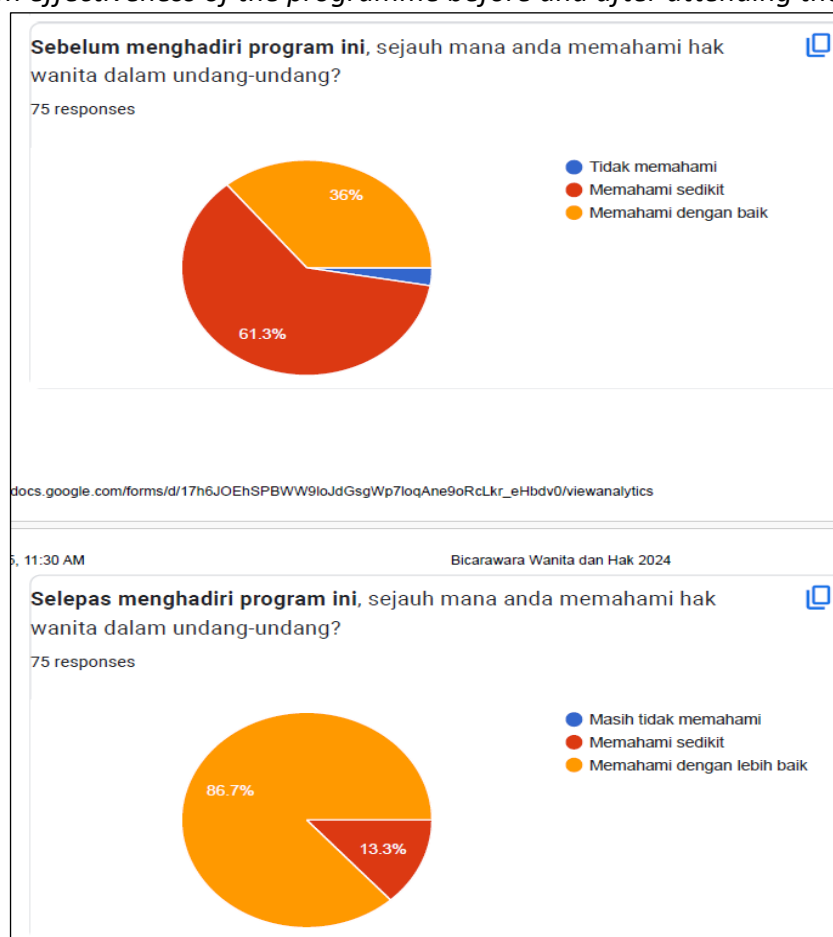
Relevance and importance of the information gained during the programme

Table 4

Comparison on effectiveness of the programme before and after attending the programme

Despite improvements in legal awareness, challenges remain in the enforcement of women's rights. One of the primary issues is the difficulty in ensuring compliance with the court-ordered maintenance payments. While BSK plays a role in enforcement, delays and bureaucratic obstacles often hinder the effectiveness of the legal system. Additionally, cultural and societal barriers sometimes discourage women from pursuing legal action, particularly in cases of domestic violence and divorce. Many women also face financial

constraints that limit their access to legal representation, making it difficult for them to navigate the legal system effectively.

To enhance the effectiveness of literacy programmes and improve the enforcement of women's rights, several recommendations are made. Firstly, regular public awareness campaigns should be conducted through digital platforms and community outreach initiatives to ensure continuous education on legal rights. Secondly, men should be encouraged to participate in these kinds of programmes to foster a shared understanding of responsibilities within households and communities. Thirdly, enforcement mechanisms within the Syariah legal system should be strengthened to ensure timely compliance with maintenance and divorce settlements. Lastly, the accessibility of legal aid services should be expanded, particularly in rural areas, to ensure that all women, regardless of their socio-economic status, can seek justice effectively.

Conclusion

This research develops Women's Empowerment Theory through Legal Awareness. Legal literacy not only involves knowing one's rights but also understanding how women can use this knowledge to empower themselves in daily life. It has a significant impact on the society and nation in enhancing awareness among women regarding their legal rights. A legal literacy programme on women's rights will have a positive impact by raising awareness of women's rights, reducing gender-based violence, and empowering communities, thereby supporting gender equality. Economically, it will enhance women's economic participation, reduce wage inequality, and support local economic growth. At the national level, this programme will strengthen the rule of law, improve the country's image internationally, and support the Sustainable Development Goals, while driving more inclusive and fair policy changes.

The "Bicarawara Literasi Undang-Undang: Wanita dan Hak" programme has demonstrated significant success in increasing legal awareness among women and equipping them with the knowledge needed to assert their rights. However, the enforcement of these rights remains a challenge, requiring stronger legal mechanisms, greater accessibility to legal aid, and continued public education efforts. Strengthening legal literacy initiatives is essential in creating an empowered society where women can fully exercise their legal rights and receive the protection they deserve. Through sustained efforts, legal literacy programmes can contribute to fostering a more just and equitable legal system for all women in Malaysia.

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