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## At Odds: Perceived Stigma of Single Professional Malay Women

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### Abstract

*Anak dara tua* (andartu) or *anak dara lanjut usia* (andalusia) are terms used in Malay culture to designate a woman's unmarried status which mean old virgin or old maiden. Our language further functions to enhance stigma in that population as they are being referred to as *tak laku* (not sellable) or *jual mahal* (playing hard). The majority of researchers have failed to consider the role culture and religion might play for single women in quality of life, social status and lifestyle that take precedence over the common experience women share. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 professional Malay Muslim women who have not married, this paper highlights some of the societal stigma, problems and pressures single Malay women experience when they are not married. This paper argued that the meanings of singlehood among women are personally constructed through one life's experiences that are situated within and reinforced by important social contexts, such as one's culture and religious faith.

**Keywords:** Singlehood, Psychology, Malay women, Marriage, Gender

### Introduction

The phenomenon of *andartu* or *andalusia* or *lalo* in Sarawak local dialect – all meaning spinsterhood - is increasingly reported in contemporary Malaysian media, clearly illustrating the changing patterns of modern lifestyles and attitudes towards marriage. In Malaysia, marriage patterns have changed dramatically and an increasing number of people have remained unmarried. The mean age of a first marriage among Malaysian women increased from 22 years in 1970 to 25 years in 2000 (Tey, 2007). The proportion of women who have not married among those aged 30-34 years increased from 6 percent in 1990 to 9.7 percent in 2000. Surprisingly, despite the relatively high degree of research in this area in the west, there remains a lack of research on issues faced by single professional Malay Muslim women who have not married.

### Research on Single Women

A review of single literature in western context highlights some confusing and problematic terms used when discussing single, never married women. Many researchers have failed to distinguish between single women who are never married and women who are cohabitating, divorced, widowed or separated. According to Carr (2008), the never-married subgroup is highly diverse: some are unmarried by choice; others view themselves as temporarily single and are waiting to find a spouse; others, still, are legally prohibited from marrying because they and their partner are of the same sex. A further limitation of the majority of studies of single women is that they often combine all unmarried persons into one group and compare them to married individuals. According to Byrne and Carr (2005), "Similarities between the two groups are often ignored, and differences (particularly those differences where the single fare worse than the married) are attributed to the less desirable aspects of singlehood or, worse yet, to personal deficiencies of the single persons themselves" (p. 84). As Bourdieu (1996) observed, the dichotomies of married versus not married and family versus individual underlie "the common principle of vision and division that we all have in our heads" (p.20).

The culture of a society is "the glue that holds its members together through a common language, dressing, food, religion, beliefs, aspirations and challenges. It is a set of learned behaviour patterns so deeply ingrained" that we act them out in "unconscious and involuntary" (Abdullah, 1996, p. 3) ways. Therefore, past conceptualizations typically considered husbandless and childless women as deviant because society has long in history viewed marriage as the most wanted pathway for women in adult life and marriage is always glorified. While a majority of the research on single never-married or unmarried women has been conducted in western settings, there is an emerging body of literature that has begun to examine this phenomenon in non-western countries (e.g., Ferguson, 2003; Jones, 2004, 2005; Lyons-Lee, 1998; Nemoto, 2008; Sitomurang 2005; Quah, 2003; Tan, 2002; Tey, 2007; Williams et al., 2006). The trend in recent years shows that prolonged singleness is a common occurrence, especially amongst highly educated, career-oriented, economically independent and urban-based women (Maeda, 2008; Sitomurang, 2005). Since career and education are positively related, in this new era, these two factors influence people's attitudes. And while children are expected to be obedient in Malaysia, they are raised to be independent in Singapore, mirroring developed western countries (Javidan & House, 2001).

### Being Single in Malay Culture

Singleness among Malay Muslim women in Malaysia was highlighted in national newspaper; *Utusan Malaysia* (2005) reported that 70% of professional Malaysian women are unmarried. The report attracts the concern of many people and leads to heated debate on how to solve the 'problems' of single professional women. Since then, attempts have been made to alleviate the problem. These efforts, however, are constrained by lack of research on the phenomenon. The reviews of articles and examination of the current scenario reveal four major reasons for this 'problem'. First, a late marriage for women is assumed to affect fertility capabilities and thus lower the chances of having many children and contribute to the decline of the Malay population. The crude birth rate declined from 23.4% in 2000 to only 18.8% in 2010 (Department of Statistics, 2010). For Malays, the more children

a couple has, the more they contribute to the expansion of Muslim *ummah* (society). Second, prolonged singleness is seen as a social change that challenges long-accepted norms of universal marriage among Malays. Traditionally, roles of women are defined according to their lifecycle beginning from being a daughter and later a wife, mother and grandmother. For the never-married women, their role as daughters of the family continue in perpetuity so long that they remain single; and this also indicates parents' responsibility towards them not being totally fulfilled by failing to marry their daughters with good potential husbands. Third, singleness is considered problematic because an unmarried woman does not have a legitimate partner to fulfil their sexual needs (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). Since sexual desire is human *fitrah* (nature), those without legitimate partners might be vulnerable to illicit sexual activities either as a victim or a seductress. Consequently, the negative perceptions and stereotype against single is typical. Fourth, the 'problem' of singleness is seen as a challenge towards the marriage institution.

Popular culture in the early twenty-first century, exemplified in the recent spate of reality television shows in Malaysia (for example, *Program Mencari Menantu* -Looking for daughter-in-law, *Gadis Melayu* - Malay ladies, *Mencari cinta* - Looking for love, *Mencari pasangan* - Looking for soul mate) which portray young adults' public pursuit of spouses, underscores the pervasiveness of the cultural message that marriage is still a sought-after irreplaceable goal for healthy heterosexual Malay women. It is observed that the cultural consensus about gender and marriage has changed in recent years and that current cohorts of young Malay women are redefining their identity and cultural rules about being married in Malay culture.

The present study is based on the assumption that the meanings of singlehood as described by Malay women come through various sources—different sources for different people. Understanding for each woman is thus personally constructed through her own life experience, situated within, and reinforced by, culture and religion.

## **Method**

A qualitative approach was used in this study because it enabled existential insights into the lived experience from the perspective of single women and privileged their voices. Having identified the need for research into the subjective interpretations and personal experiences of single Malay women, the interpretative orientation of the method is chosen because it accepts that the final analysis produced is an inevitable combination of the interaction between researcher's world-view and that of the participants. The participants' accounts of their single experiences, tape recorded in the semi-structured interviews, were transcribed and subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The systematic nature of the approach and well-delineated procedures for analysis of data (Smith & Osborn, 2003) have also made IPA a popular and reliable research method among psychologists. In conclusion, Phenomenology and IPA as interpretative qualitative methodology have been utilised because the area of investigation is new and the focus of the study is exploratory and phenomenological (Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle, 1990).

## **Participants**

With the goal of eliciting the in-depth emotional experience of single Malay Muslim women, interviews were conducted with 20 professional Malay women who have not married, aged between 25 and 55 years. This age range was chosen because the mean age at first marriage among Malaysian women, at present, is 25.1 years and the mandatory age for retirement during the study is 55. The sampling frame was located in Kuching, Sarawak, the eastern part of Malaysia, a southeast Asian country with a modern and moderate Muslim profile (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006). The purpose of this present study is to highlight the discrimination and stigmatisation perceived by single professional Malay women.

## Results and Discussion

### Discrimination and Stigmatisation

Analysis of the participants' responses revealed that single women's accounts of being labelled as *tak laku* (not sellable) or *anak dara tua* (spinsters) were interwoven with their stories of being stigmatized and discriminated against. The participants were asked if there were situations in which they feel uncomfortable or self-conscious about being single. All effortlessly described a variety of encounters in their family, work and public settings in which women feel singleness influences how others perceive and interact with them. The women believe that being single does not exclude them from the rest of society but people tend to have a negative impression of them, like "what's wrong with her?", and they always ask them when they are going to marry. All the women reported the presence of stigma; all were able to provide an account of feeling somewhat different or being treated in a less advantageous manner compared to married women, just because they were single. For example, one of the most poignant and telling remarks made in an interview was the comment, "*Single women are human being too, you know*". Discrimination is experienced in family, workplace and public spheres. The common sub themes relating to the singles being discriminated against are described in the next section.

### Discrimination in the Family

Across the interviews, many single women who lived with their parents, or close to their parents, reported that they are often regarded as the sole and permanent caretaker of their parents; they are taken advantage of by other siblings who are married. For example, those who are married think that the parent should stay with the single daughter because she has less commitment and has more time. Fatma's comment makes apparent the unfair treatment by her other siblings who have a mind-set that she is always available to take care of their mother whenever the other siblings need to go somewhere.

*My mother is always with me, I will take care of her, but I guess she needs other people too. My other brothers and sisters to bring her around and show her places. (Fatma)*

The women reported that they were discriminated against in terms of unequal expectations of siblings. For example, they were taken for granted financially by their closed family members. A number of participants in this study appeared to be the main bread winners for their parents and younger siblings. Shaz stated that she has to cover all household expenditure whenever she goes back home to see her mother. She is also becoming a financial resource for her other siblings.



*One more thing is about my brothers and sisters. I am single, so, they like to loan money from me; some asked me to become the guarantor, help him there a bit, help her to buy milk for her babies and so on. Whenever I go back home to visit my mom, I will have to pay for everything, the food, the bills, the petrol to go around, all goes back to me. That's because I'm single and I have good salary. Well, sometimes, I don't want to think about it. I want to be generous and sincere but when it comes to the loan, I felt upset, I told them, if I die tomorrow, and then only you want to pay back the loans; just settle it at the welfare department. This is kind of reminder to them. (Shaz)*

In this present research, the caring responsibilities of the single women as daughter and sister was perceived as taken advantage of by other siblings. The women perceived that their kindness is taken for granted, which might have caused them to feel angry and disappointed at times. In addition, the singles reported that they are financially burdened in having to cover for the expenses of their parents' care, and even occasionally for their siblings and their families. They felt that the responsibilities should be distributed evenly among other siblings.

The findings revealed that, for some of the participants, the parents and siblings are their responsibility; they have to support their parents financially and at the same time appeared to be the bread winners for other siblings too. Such findings parallel research undertaken by Simpson (2003) that caring responsibilities have always been the role of unmarried daughters. Her research on caring relationships of contemporary spinsters as daughters and mothers was based in London, and she concluded that caring responsibilities remain an important role for unmarried women, though it might be undertaken in a different context. A few studies throughout the Asian region also found that daughters are reliable contributors to family finances (Jones, 1994; Ong, 1987).

The highly dependent nature of the other siblings was the fact that the singles are seen as more financially sufficient because they have no immediate families to spend for. This study indicated that being single was always associated with less commitments and fewer responsibilities and, therefore, they are assumed to have a lot of money. Thus, the obligations to take care of parents always falls on the shoulder of the singles, even though the parents should be the responsibility of all children, regardless of marital status.

### **Discrimination in the Workplace**

Across the interviews, many participants described their experiences of being stigmatised against by married colleagues. Maria's comments highlight some of the common discrimination experienced by the singles in this study.

*People are being negative but they never know that singles contribute more to the public. In this office, singles are on going working, because the married one are busy. They have a lot of commitment. As if singles do not have to eat, drink, rest, just like machine. That's why, for staff transfer, you're transferred very far away because you're single. That's what happened to me... They perceived single people are less important, as second class people, but they are*

*the first class people to do their work. As in married people are allowed to take leave to take care of a sick family member, the privileges are not given to unmarried people. Furthermore, single people are taken for granted and posted to a far place, as if she is not sick, she has no parents... Single people are treated as secondary importance, yet they provide the best service. Peoples' mentality need to be changed. (Maria)*

Another participant, Fatma, argued that if the married employees can argue that the weekend is for their families, it should be the same for singles; they have nieces and nephews to spend time with, they have friends to go out with, and, most importantly, they have parents to look after, too. For Atiqah, it was a lame excuse for the married ones to not do more work just because the children are sick, or because they have to attend school functions. This is because those who are married should have been able to divide such jobs with their spouses. Apparently, Atiqah was not happy with the different treatment she received from her seniors compared to her married colleagues who were perceived as being given some privileges to be excused from their work. Several other singles mentioned that they were asked to do after hours work, to travel out of town to settle their work, and were the last to be considered for promotion.

Both Atiqah and Fatma expressed their frustration and annoyance due to unequal treatment between single and married workers. Although they are single and have no husband and children to consider, they still have other caring responsibility roles for their parents and families. Being single does not mean they are always free to be burdened with after hours work, work during the weekend, and to travel out of the town at any time. Single women in this study reported that, in comparison with their married colleagues, they were always perceived as more career-oriented, and not having many outside obligations or interests. Therefore, they were expected to work overtime, even during holidays.

This finding resonates with single studies from a western context. For example, Byrne and Carr (2005) coined the term interpersonal or institutional mistreatment to refer to discriminatory behaviour against singles on a daily interpersonal basis and at the work place. No research to date has involved evaluating directly whether unmarried persons are more likely to experience discrimination within major social institutions or organizations. In general, the organizations may tend to hold various perceptions of single women when comparing them to other married women in the workplace. For example, the single women may be seen as being more stable or permanent in their career because they are unlikely to quit their job to follow their husband, they are unlikely to take long leave due to pregnancy and giving birth, and they face less family-related distractions from work. Although it is possible that the women may have perceived that they were treated unfairly by their employers, on the other hand, they may have been perceived as efficient employee by their employer and were seen as positive at their work. Therefore, the discrimination could be a positive experience by the women even though such experience was considered as disadvantageous.

This finding is congruent with Hamilton, Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2006) who found that just as married women with and without children have difficulty achieving balance between work demands and family demands, never-married women without children have difficulty achieving balance

between demands placed on them by work and participation in other life roles. They also explained that the never-married women get caught in a self-reinforcing cycle where they devote so much time and energy to their work role that they do not have extra personal resources for others. The latter findings diverge with the present research in the sense that the Malay women also devote such energy and commitments to non-work life roles as daughters, sisters, aunts and employees that might not be considered as a “legitimate” (i.e., organizationally and societally recognized) excuse or distraction from work (Hamilton et al., 2006). It is not the purpose of this study to evaluate whether the discrimination at the workplace is a reality for the single women, but the results suggest that the singles perceive that they were treated differently at the workplace due to their single status. The participants have given a few aspects of what they considered as double standard or discrimination against them, including, extra workloads, longer hours, odd hours, more travelling, and a difficulty in getting leave.

### **Discrimination by the Public**

One of the most consistent findings in this study was the stigmatization and labelling faced by the participants within society. Across all interviews, the participants mentioned labels such as *andartu* (old virgin), *tak laku* (not sellable), *lalo* (old maid). Several singles were even slandered with cynical remarks such as, “What a pity” and “She has not experienced it (sex) yet”. Also, some people perceived single women as not knowing anything about married life and having less experience. Many of the women were tired and sometimes irritated about responding to the question, “when are you getting marry?”, which indicated to them that their singleness was not acceptable to the larger society. For example, Rina and Latifah both described others as disapproving and suspicious that something was wrong with them. Rina felt that most people’s comments were negative, and for Latifah such negative labels also affected her parents.

*...they will think that there's something wrong with you that you are not able to find your soul mate at that age, and maybe you are not attractive enough, you know. Emmm I don't know, I don't know. But that's what most of the people are saying. (Rina)*

*People badmouth you when you stay out late with male friends. That affects me and my parents. This is the negative effects of being single, your parents also involved too. They also get the bad comments that their daughter is a spinster. (Latifah)*

Several singles voiced irritation at society’s vision of the single as desperate and easy, and therefore being a threat to married women because their husbands could possibly take the singles as potential second, third or fourth wives since polygamy is allowed in Islam. Many participants were insulted by cultural stereotypes of the single career woman as *perampas suami orang* (husband snatchers). For example, the experiences of Tiara and Zai are described below:

*Some people are very sceptical of single ladies and in general they are afraid of single lady and think that whenever the singles are nice to some men, there is always a hidden agenda and all that. (Tiara)*



.... *people always think that when we are singles, we are easy. Actually, it is not, the problem is not us who like to flirt but the people (men) who like to tease singles. There are a lot of negative perceptions. (Zai)*

Labels such as *andartu* (old maid), *andalusia* (virgin of old age), *lalo* (spinsters), swinger, spinster, singledom are a few negative labels associated with women in this study. However, there is nothing new with this finding because a review of the relevant literature in the western context in particular also reveals the stereotypical views of singleness as evident in the connotations of spinsters and old maids as social failures, and social deviants (Baumbusch, 2004; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Lyons-Lee, 1998; Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Rubinstein et al., 1991). According to Cargan and Melko (1982), when marriage is the social norm, remaining unmarried or choosing against marriage leads to negative stereotypes and stigma, and a series of isms or singlism (DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

There are a few possible explanations for the public stigma of Malay singles. First, past conceptualizations typically considered never-married, childless Malay women as deviant because Malay society had always viewed marriage as the most desirable pathway for women. It is apparent that for single women in this study, remaining single past a marriageable age is considered as deviant, as doing something wrong, as being unusual and different. Their role as Malay women is regarded as anomalous and their femininity deemed suspect. This is consistent with previous findings by Sharp and Ganong (2011), who revealed that single women remain restricted and face stigma and discrimination in a society that promotes marriage and motherhood as central to women's identities. Although Sharp and Ganong's research was conducted among ten white mid-western women in America, a highly individualistic country, the participants still reported being stigmatized and discriminated against. For Malay women, who come from a highly collectivistic society where everybody tends to talk about everyone's business all the time, the impact is magnified.

Second, the so-called preferred timing has caused a kind of anxiety for some Malay women to get married and become a mother. Even though the Malays believe that *Jodoh di tangan Tuhan*, and that a person's *jodoh* can possibly come at any time in their life, their right age should not be more than the 30s. For Malay women, these age norm for major events in their life reinforce the stigma associated with not getting married or having children by the right age. The majority of the participants reported to have been asked by their families and friends, "When are you next?", when they passed their 30s. Never-married women are being portrayed with negative stereotypes, as if something is wrong with them if they do not marry by then. Finally, as the ideology of singlehood is a problem that needs to be fixed, never-married Malay women are often stigmatized as having a problem, namely their single status is in need of being fixed (Baumbusch, 2004; Kaslow, 1992; Uhlenberg, 1974; Wilson, 2004). Compared to the young singles, many older participants in this study articulated that the negative labelling was much stronger in the 1970s and 1980s where the glorification of marriage was intense.

Link and Phelan (2001) propose that a core component of the stigma process is that the labelled person experiences discrimination and status loss, which in turn may have harmful consequences for their life chances, including their psychological, economic, and physical well-being. According to this

definition, singles in this study were clearly stigmatized. The women reported feelings of being abandoned by their married friends; some felt like they endured double standards on the infrequent occasions when they were invited to *pengilan* (wedding ceremony), *hari raya* (Eid celebration) and family gatherings. They felt like their needs were not given as much respect compared to those of married and experienced ones, and that they were treated as if they were less than fully adult.

### Conclusion

It seems common for singles to be discriminated against, in similar ways to people from different races or ethnicities or religions or disabilities. Such consistent stigma can be found in the women of the present study; they reported to be discriminated in the family, workplace and by the public. These stereotypes do a great injustice to the complex and diverse reality of single women's lived experience. The implication of the current study is that cultural and familial stereotypes should be explored in understanding the single Malay women and the preconceived assumptions and negative conceptions are not necessarily true for this group of women. Greater sensitivity to their needs as singles is also required amongst family members, friends and the community. Moreover, from both a psychological and social perspective, there is a need to educate people that not all singles are hopeless and helpless.

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