



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i14/5030>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i14/5030

Received: 21 Aug 2018, Revised: 29 Oct 2018, Accepted: 10 Dec 2018

Published Online: 23 Dec 2018

In-Text Citation: (Sali & Shanat, 2018)

To Cite this Article: Sali, J., & Shanat, M. (2018). “I’m Not Married, Let’s Just All Look at Me”: Single Professional Malay Women’s Experience. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(14), 91–99.

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Special Issue: Transforming Community Towards a Sustainable and Globalized Society, 2018, Pg. 91 - 99

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“I’m Not Married, Let’s Just All Look at Me”: Single Professional Malay Women’s Experience

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Abstract

Clearly for most people and most cultures, marriage is a pre-ordained path, the preferred social status and the sanctioned way. In Malay culture, most people cannot accept the idea that a never married ‘normal’ woman could be happy and satisfied with her life. To be an *andartu* (*anak dara tua*) or *andalusia* (*anak dara lanjut usia*) is still marginally acceptable in Malay culture. This paper explores the voices of single Malay women in Malaysia with 'single' being defined as never married and focus on the professional working women. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, 20 interviews were conducted using semi structured in-depth interviews. This research examines perspectives of these women on being single and thus highlights some of the negative emotional consequences of being single. The analysis revealed that the emotional consequences include feelings of loneliness, feeling of incompleteness and inadequacy, regrets of missed opportunities and anger at perceived harassment. As the delayed marriage of women aged 30 years and over in Malaysia is a relatively recent phenomenon, the research outcomes will have important implications to the extant literature on professional Malay women who have not married by relating to Muslim women in general and Malaysia or South East Asia in particular.

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

Introduction

As the delayed marriage of women aged 30 years and over in Malaysia is a relatively recent phenomenon, no studies have been conducted related to this issue. 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). Singleness among

professional Malay Muslim women in Malaysia was highlighted in national newspaper; *Utusan Malaysia* (2005) reported that 70% of professional Malaysian women are unmarried. 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

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). Very few researchers have looked into single studies in South East Asia and with a mixed sample of age, ethnicity and religious background. It appears, however, that no research has addressed Malay Muslim women in relation to the issues of singlehood except preliminary study done by Ibrahim and Hassan (2009).

Islam permeates every facet of Malay life in the realm of values and behaviour. Changes in marital trends and family life in Malaysia and other South East Asian countries do not mirror those that have occurred in the west. Much of the research on single women in the west has only looked at singles based on their 'civil status' and failed to distinguish between single women who have never married and women who are divorced, widowed, separated or cohabitating. Age at marriage has increased most significantly in countries that, like Malaysia, have experienced rapid economic growth (Jones, 2007; Tan, 2002). "The increasing labour force participation of women and changing attitudes toward employment of women of all races has made alternatives to marriage more attractive." (Anderson, Hill, & Butler, 1987, p.225). Since career and education are positively related, in this new era, these two factors influence people's attitudes. Although higher education, financial stability and career advancement are important for every woman (Jones, 2004; 2005), this research demonstrates that the pattern of the women's perspectives on *Jodoh* is consistent. The women did not vary significantly with respect to their belief in predestination regarding marriage and they hold to *Qada* (decree) and *Qadar* (destined), the fifth of the six fundamentals of *Iman* (faith) among Muslims. The words *Qada* and *Qadar* is a very broad concept; it brings the same meaning to some of the metaphorical statements given by the participants, such as: "*Things happened for reasons*", "*Blessing in disguise*", "*Wisdom behind it*", "*kun faya kun*" (*what will be will be*).

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. The organization of society around family groups (the collectivity of Malay society) where singlehood is considered a transitional stage between family of origin and

family of creation also contributes to the absence of marriage being seen as a deficit or deviation from what is socially desirable or deficit (Reynold & Wetherell, 2003). Moreover, a review of the literature suggest that many professional women are finding it increasingly difficult to 'have it all' (Lyons-Lee, 1998). They receive pressure from family, friends and colleagues. Consequently, never-married women are often stigmatized as having a 'problem', namely their single status, in need of being fixed (Baumbusch, 2004; Kaslow, 1992; Wilson, 2004).

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., Jones, 2004; Lyons-Lee, 1998; Nemoto, 2008; Sitomurang 2005; 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). Similar trends are also apparent in the Muslim societies in South East Asian countries where, traditionally, marriage happens at a young age.

The Malay Concept of Womanhood, Roles and Responsibilities

The purpose of marriage differs across cultures. As we have seen above, marriage in Asian cultures has often been viewed as the negotiation of an alliance between families (Dugsin, 2001; Gordon, 2003; Noor, 1999) and children are expected to provide care for aging parents. There is a saying that when a Malay woman gets married, she is married not only to the man but also to the in-laws (Noor, 2001). The Malaysian woman therefore may find herself subject to immense pressure to marry in the first instance and to marry a suitable man in the second instance—pressure that is rarely applied rigorously to her western counterpart. By contrast, a woman from an individualistic orientation may choose a mate with whom she is 'in love' and meets her needs for intimacy, joy, and provides her with resources she could not otherwise obtain (Berkovitch & Bradley, 1999; Genov, 1997).

In Malay marriage-oriented culture, every effort is made to find a suitable partner who will hopefully become the woman's soul mate; they prioritize marriage as a goal in life and work hard towards it (Noor, 1999). The importance of the institution of marriage among Malays receives its greatest emphasis from the following hadith of the Prophet, "Marriage is my sunna (divine injunction). In other cultures, while women in the mainstream also tend to marry, this may be after a period of cohabitation or experimentation with alternative lifestyles such as homosexuality (Imtoul & Hussein, 2009) what Malaysians in general would condemn as a 'free sex culture'.

Thus from the Malay cultural perspective, marriage is the norm and most desirable state for a female. A sexually mature female who is unmarried is culturally defined as "abnormal" or "deviant" and exposed to *fitna* (tempt or lure). What the society prizes in women is chastity. Thus as family honour and reputation depend to a considerable degree on the behaviour of single woman in the extended family, it is the family duty to protect her modesty and chastity. From the perspective of the woman, marriage is a prerequisite for full acceptance into society, respectability and prestige. Consequently, a woman is not considered a full social being or a fully authenticated person until she is married

(Ackerman, 1991). Without marriage, Malay women feel that their personal narratives do not measure up to the cultural construction of woman (Omar, 1994).

Methodology

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. 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 research paradigm was constructed from a phenomenological psychological stance, allowing women's experiences to speak for themselves. 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. 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).

Negative Consequences of Being Single

The current study revealed that the emotional consequences of being single include feelings of loneliness, in particular loneliness due to the lack of a companion; feelings of incompleteness and inadequacy; regrets of missed opportunities, and anger at perceived harassment.

Evidence in this study suggests that most single professional Malay Muslim women desire relationships with husband and children to satisfy their need for belonging, companionship and intimacy.

I missed the intimacy of being with somebody, in the sense, not intimacy as far as sexual relation is concerned, but more like, companionship. (Ida)

Basically on the upset side it is just because you are not married. Sometimes you envy people who have children and then they have their loved one at home and we are not. (Nurul)

They attributed their loneliness and lack of companionship to not having a husband and children. In addition, there is always an apparent need to connect, to have a companion, to have someone to rely on and to talk to, to love and to be loved by- elements that they probably could not fulfill from their other 'key relationships'. This is consistent with the work of White, Hays, and Livesey (2005), finding a partner to share one's life with is a major milestone of adult social development. Similarly, Dion (2005) stated that the most memorable aspect of one's life is the personal relationship (marital and romantic) he or she experienced along his or her path. It is also apparent from this study that although most participants reported being lonely and lacking companionship, they are not without relationship. This is because most of them are still living with their parents who may provide emotional and physical support at any time the singles need it. Research on singles conducted in non-western countries, for example in Indonesia and Thailand, revealed details about the living arrangement of single women, in that, although the women are single and unmarried, they do not live alone; they are expected to live with parents and relatives (Situmorang, 2007; Tan, 2002). This

study is consistent with previous findings where the majority of participants live with their parents and are responsible for their parents' wellbeing.

Participants acknowledged that they had no control over, or means of escaping this socially defined position. Cultural expectations and religious mandates had become the push factors towards marriage (Stein, 1976).

Marriage, you know, is to complete my life, to complete myself, you know. I consider marriage is that. And I want to be a perfect woman. A complete woman. To have a husband, to be a mother, you know. I have this dream. (Nor)

These preconceived expectations may have caused a self-critical and self-condemning as the participants assimilated such beliefs. It is possible that the ideology of marriage within Malay society has caused unmarried women to assume feelings of guilt at their failure to fulfil the expectations of their families, their society and their religion. "Although unmarried persons, both male and female, often are viewed as responsible for their single status due to some character flaw or blemish, such as promiscuity, immaturity, self-centeredness, or a lack of personal discipline" (Byrne & Carr, 2005, p.85), this is not necessarily the case for single professional Malay Muslim women. The view of deficiency is very powerful and appears to override the women's rational view of themselves as adequate and complete persons.

Overall, based on participants' perceptions, it appears that, despite the growing numbers of single Malay women, the idealization of marriage and child rearing remains strong, pervasive, and largely unquestioned among Malays. The participants' self-identity and social identity are characterized by pressure to conform to the conventional marriage and motherhood pathway.

Clearly, for the participants, the aged-restricted time limits on bearing children and perceived social timetables for childrearing enhance the feeling of regrets they experienced.

Regret, kind of; I should have got married when I was 24. My mother once said to me, "I got married when I was 24, when I was 30, I already have two kids". I think it's a regret that I didn't get married earlier because now I'm 31. It's not the good time for female. (Sal)

The increasing physical age may heighten the singles' awareness of the fewer opportunities and hopes, including a decreasing number of single friends, acknowledging the risks accompanying later childbearing, and also the diminishing dating pool. This finding is consistent with Morris et al. (2007) and Sharp and Ganong, (2011), who found that unmarried women older than 40 years old are viewed as past their prime and the hope to get pregnant and to have their own biological children is dwindling. In general, getting married is not just the first big step toward living the life that other people expect of the single women. Even if they pass that step, they still will not be full adults unless they do the next thing they are supposed to do - have children.

The element of pressure from family, friends and colleagues is an important finding of the current study. Questioning caused intense emotions and all agreed their lives would be much easier if people, including family and friends, would stop asking them about getting married and bombarding them with such “irritating” questions over and over again.

I just hope that people stop asking me that one million dollar question. In fact, there was once people asked me, ‘Engkau bila nak kahwin?’ (When will you get married?) It was so irritating and I replied, ‘Why did you ask me, why not you ask Allah, ask Him’. Then my friend told me that I was so defensive. Then I asked her, ‘What do you expect me to answer, how should I answer?’ If possible, support me; don’t ask all sorts of questions. (Shaz)

How does perceived harassment affect single Malay women psychologically? Anger is sometimes expressed as a cover for other emotions. In this context, anger could be an expression of *malu*. The concept of *malu* among Malays is important. *Malu* is a mixture of embarrassment, humiliation, shame and shyness, all of which affect self-respect and perceptions of the women’s dignity. In regard to being single, the desire to avoid *malu* may become the primary force for their choice of social isolation, particularly in the Malay village (Goddard, 1997). Because of their lack of husband and children, the participants felt a strong *malu* which overrides their career success. They feel *malu* probably because first, they feel like they are visibly on the marriage market (Zimon-Tobin, 1986) or conspicuous in some way (Chasteen, 1994). Second, they fear being seen as imperfect and finally, they have a sense of losing because of their inability to win a man’s heart. Consequently, to preserve face they withdrew from family and community. The erosion of their self-esteem causes them to underestimate their personal power to create connections, to commit to a relationship, and to make choices in their lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the women in this study experienced negative emotions including loneliness and lack of a companion, feelings of personal inadequacy, regrets of missed opportunities, and anger at perceived harassment. The emotional burden is reinforced by the dominant conception of Malay womanhood as wife and mother (Hayes, 2004; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). While they might have developed their self-concept as respectable individuals by being successful career women, this appears to be overshadowed by *malu*. The women may feel a sense of failure, deficiency and regret at not getting married earlier. Their feeling of incompleteness and inadequacy is due to their perception of not fulfilling the role of Malay women as wife and mother. Being married, she is a perfect woman but being professional and highly educated, she is imperfect, and is indeed deficient and defective. However, an important finding as indicated in the study, single professional Malay women are productive and generative in their career domain, often much more than their married counterparts. They are teaching others’ children instead of their own, having own college, manage a company, and write scholar articles and books. They have constructed their reality differently. They define themselves within familial roles by being devoted, caring, and responsible daughters, granddaughters, aunties, sisters, volunteer and colleagues. They do not appear to be isolated and alienated.

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